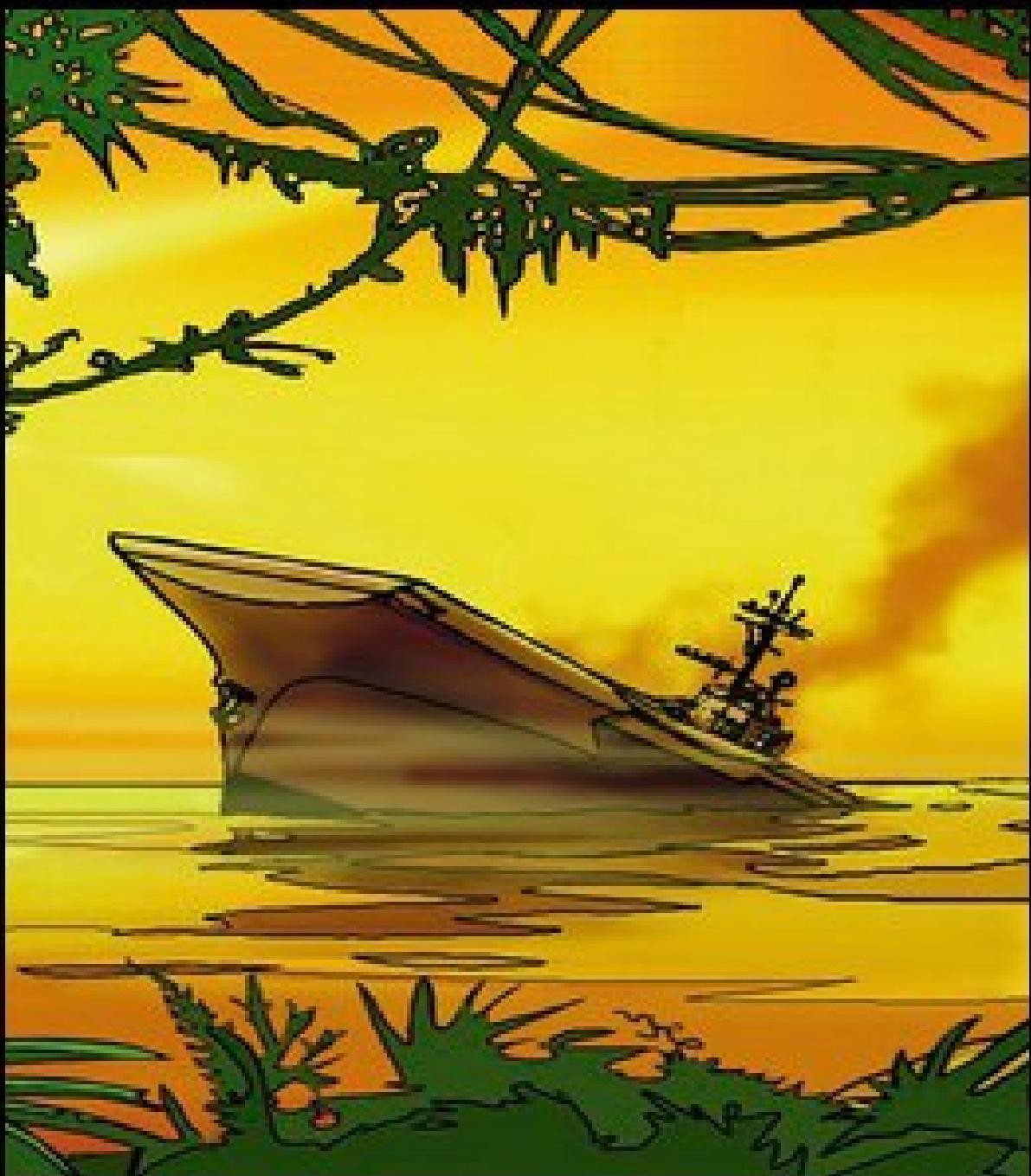


THE
INVESTIGATORS
in

THE MYSTERY OF THE
BURNING CRYSTAL
PART II: FLAMING WATERS



THE
INVESTIGATORS

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THE MYSTERY
OF THE
BURNING CRYSTAL

Part II: Flaming Waters

After their rescue from an underground bunker, Jupiter and Pete put their case on hold as they desperately try to save Bob. When The Three Investigators finally recover from their ordeals, they realize that they are up against a very ruthless gang who will do anything to get them out of the way. They find more clues that lead them to locate a precious treasure from a decommissioned ship. However, the problem is that the ship will soon be sunk in 'flaming waters'.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Burning Crystal
Part II: Flaming Waters

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Die drei ???: Geisterbucht
Teil 2: Flammendes Wasser

(The Three ???: Ghost Bay)
(Part 2: Flaming Waters)

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1. Trapped in the Basement

There was a tremendous crash and the earth trembled. Instinctively, Jupiter and Pete threw themselves on the ground and held their hands over their heads. Dust trickled off the plastered walls and some bottles tipped over, rolled off the shelves and broke. Jupiter was hit hard in the back. To make matters worst, the gas lamp broke as well. Now they are in total darkness. There was a pervasive smell of wine mixed with the stench of burning wood and plastic. They heard somewhere above them, objects exploded, walls and ceilings collapsed. But the room hewn into the ground held out.

At some point, it was over. The fire continued to crackle, but Jupiter was hard of hearing after the infernal noise of the collapse. At least he could hear himself coughing. Carefully he straightened up. “Pete?”

“I am dead,” Pete said.

“The evidence is against it.”

“Come on, you always say that,” Pete quipped. “There’s no way we could have survived that collapse.”

“Yes, we did,” replied Jupiter. “I don’t think we are exactly under the house. I didn’t pay attention in the chaos, but the stairs lead straight ahead from the basement. We’re not exactly underneath the house. I think Mr Sapchevsky had this room here built just for emergencies like this. And if we have a bit more luck now and the exit of our air shaft has not been buried, we will survive until the fire fighters get us out.”

He looked for the flashlight and turned it on. The light flickered at first and then solidified into a thin beam that slid through a cloud of dust over fallen cans, milk cartons and broken glass. “At least we won’t starve.” Jupiter said as he shone the light on Pete, who looked like a dusty ghost.

“That is the main thing,” Pete said sarcastically. “And how will the fire fighters get us out if there is no access? How will they even find us?”

“Bob knows we’re here.”

“Bob will have a heart attack when he sees the house—or what’s left of it now! How would he even know that we came into the house and got trapped in here?”

Jupiter had to admit that there was some truth in it. “But I still assume that we will be saved.”

“Because you are a professional optimist,” Pete said bitterly. “At least turn off the flashlight! Who knows how long it will last? We should save the battery.”

“Just a minute.” Jupiter illuminated the demon mask. It was a clean, neatly carved piece of craftsmanship. He turned it over and examined it. “Here is a clue—‘Orient Import Glenview’... and some reddish-black hair... and it smells like—”

Then Pete became angry. “Stop it! We’re in a death trap and you’re still investigating something!”

“We are investigators,” Jupiter said. “And if we have nothing else to do but wait for rescue, we might as well think about our case.”

“Let me off this stupid case!” Pete exploded. “I’m tired of cases where burning houses fall on our heads! In the future, I’ll only take on cases looking for runaway cats—if we can

get out of this alive! I'm sick of all of this! How about it if I won't take on any more cases at all? Then I'll pay attention at school for a change or go and play tennis with Kelly instead of being killed by some crazy criminals!"

"Pete, just calm down... just think—"

"No, I don't need to think about it! I quit! And besides, I'm scared and want to get out of here. Maybe you can't understand that, but that's the way it is! Turn off the flashlight!" He leaned with his back against a shelf and closed his eyes.

Jupiter looked at the demon mask. It seemed to sneer back at him. Then he turned off the flashlight.

They sat in silence in the dusty darkness, stinking of wine and melted plastic, listening to the crackling and blazing above their heads. To distract themselves, Jupiter thought about the case... and about Pete's announcement to quit. How could he make him think twice? Pete had often lost his nerve in crisis situations, but never before had he really said that he didn't want to be part of this anymore.

"Pete..."

"Leave me alone."

Jupiter sighed. "Don't be—" He interrupted himself before Pete could do it. Wasn't there a noise out there? "Listen!"

"I don't want to discuss it anymore!"

"No, I mean, listen! There's a helicopter out there!"

"What?"

Breathlessly, they listened into the darkness. The unmistakable rattling of a helicopter approached and then a roar and hiss drowned out the crackling of the flames.

"A fire helicopter!" Pete cried and jumped up. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hello! Here we are! Help!"

"Pete, they can't hear us!"

"I don't care! Help! Get us out of here! Help!"

The clattering distanced itself and was soon no longer audible. Pete stopped and listened.

"Pete..." said Jupiter. "Think. No one knows that we are here. We have to wait until the fire fighters come near us. Then we'll find some way to signal to them to get us out of here somehow. That can..." He swallowed and then muttered: "That could take days."

Pete turned to him. "Days?"

"They'll probably have to drill a shaft down here."

"A shaft?"

"Pete, now please don't repeat everything like a parrot. We're stuck here. Deal with it."

"Anyway, I know what I'll do if another old friend of my grandfather's leaves us a riddle."

"What?"

"I'll tear it up and go surfing."

"I'd like to say something, but since you might accuse me of having the last word again, I won't say anything."

"Suit yourself," Pete snapped.

Jupiter refrained from responding even though he was still pondering over Pete's decision to quit.

Pete waited a while, sat down again and put his head on his arms. After some time, without looking up, he asked: "Why didn't the real police come?"

"I was wondering about the same thing." Jupiter said.

“Mr Sapchevsky called them, but nobody came except Taylor,” Pete continued. “Or they came, but only after the house was already on fire.”

Then they heard shouts and noises in the distance which suggested that the fire fighters had begun their work.

Pete listened, but he seemed to have come to terms with the fact that it could be a long time before anyone came within earshot. He continued to think aloud: “Maybe those Rashura people were tapping the telephone and Mr Sapchevsky wasn’t even talking to the police, but to one of the crooks.”

“Then they really acted very fast,” Jupe remarked and recalled: “Last night, they learned from Mrs Maruthers that Mr Sapchevsky has the watch and where he lives. Earlier today, they stole the police car and showed up at the salvage yard to take the photo from us. Earlier this evening, they broke in here and stole the watch. Then they discovered that the numbers were not with the watch, and came back again with the police car.”

“But it could be done,” Pete remarked.

“It’s not out of the question.”

“And why did they... why did they want to kill us?” Pete asked.

“I don’t think that’s what they wanted to do at all. The fire broke out when we were outside the house. I think the fire was not intentional, but an accident.”

“So what do you think happened?”

“The plan was for Taylor to take Mr Sapchevsky away so that the masked man could break in,” Jupe surmised. “However, Taylor didn’t expect us to be here. Remember how surprised he looked when Mr Sapchevsky called out to us? And then he went back to the stolen police car? I bet the masked man came with them and was hiding among the trees. Taylor then warned him that we might be around. The masked man then took us out before he broke into Mr Sapchevsky’s house—to look for the numbers.”

“After taking us out, why did he continue to wear the mask in the house when Mr Sapchevsky was with Taylor?”

“Perhaps he didn’t know that Mr Sapchevsky lived up here alone and thought there might be someone else in the house,” Jupe surmised. “But somehow the fire broke out and he lost his nerve and fled.”

“But then it would have been nice to take us with him after he had tied us up earlier and knew we couldn’t get away.”

“I agree with you,” said Jupiter. “And now that masked man is really dangerous. If he thinks he has us on his conscience, he may act irrationally.”

“You said that nicely.”

“Thank you. And that’s why I’m really worried about Bob right now. I would feel a lot better if I knew he was safe.”

2. The Big Rescue

For two hours, Jupiter and Pete listened to the crackling of the flames being smothered under the surge of water from the fire fighters. When they were sure that there was nothing burning above them, they crept up the stairs and opened the door carefully. The air was full of smoke and a pile of debris was smouldering, blocking the corridor of the basement.

Jupiter closed the door again. They shared another bottle of water and were glad that Mr Sapchevsky had stocked up for emergencies. Then they waited further.

An hour later, they heard someone calling out. "Over here with the hose!"

They started and Pete jumped up. "Help!" he yelled. "Hello! Help us!"

There was a break. "What?" cried a fireman. "In this heap of rubble nothing can—Hello? Who is that?"

"We are in an underground room!" cried Pete. "Please get us out!"

"An underground room? How many of you are there? Is anyone hurt?"

Now Jupiter also stood up. "There are two of us!" he shouted. "We are stuck in an emergency bunker. No one is hurt and we have enough air and water and some supplies, but we can't get out!"

The voice came closer. "Keep calling out so I can track you! What are your names? Do you know where the owner of the house is?"

"We are Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw from Rocky Beach. The owner of this house Mr Sapchevsky was abducted tonight and then a man set fire to the house, but it may have been an accident because—"

"Very good," said the voice directly above them. "That's enough for now, thank you. Here is a kind of brick fireplace with a grille, that should be your air shaft. Don't worry, we'll get you out of there!"

"Listen, you have to call the police!" cried Jupiter. "It is urgent! Call Inspector Havilland! And Inspector Cotta of the—"

But the man had moved away. "People! There are two survivors in an underground emergency bunker!"

Excited shouts answered him, but Jupiter and Pete could no longer hear them clearly.

"I guess he didn't really believe you," said Pete. "That's probably because he didn't face you personally and couldn't enjoy your awe-inspiring aura."

Jupiter ignored the teasing. "He probably set his priorities differently. For him, getting us out is of importance. When Inspector Havilland comes, he will deal with the situation."

Inspector Havilland arrived a little later, listened to the description of the arsonist shouted by Jupiter through the shaft and went away. Then the excavators rolled in. They did not dig a shaft, but spent many hours clearing away the rubble.

Jupiter and Pete, who hadn't slept all night, took turns lying down on the camp bed, but couldn't sleep because of the noise. Finally, they sat next to each other, exhausted and irritated, until a voice in front of the door made them rise. "Okay, boys, don't shoot. I'm coming in."

The door opened and a fireman entered and grinned at them. "What do you say—fancy a bit of fresh air?"

“No thanks, we like it here quite well,” Pete said sarcastically. “We’ve just made ourselves at home!”

The man just laughed and held the door open invitingly. “Can you walk or shall we carry you out?”

“We are certainly in full possession of our abilities.” Jupiter had exaggerated a little, but of course both of them still climbed up the stairs. They stumbled out of the smoking rubble into bright lights of almost a dozen huge spotlights that had been set up all over the area for the rescue work.

They were immediately met by a flurry of camera flashlights of the waiting press, who did not miss the opportunity to exploit the poignant reunion of the Jones and Crenshaw families to such an extent that Aunt Mathilda threatened to sue for defamation if she ever heard the phrase ‘river of tears’ again.

Mr and Mrs Andrews were also there. When Jupiter saw them, he freed himself from Aunt Mathilda’s embrace and ran over to them.

“Where’s Bob?” asked Mr Andrews in a rough voice.

“He is not with us,” replied Jupiter. “He left with the Beetle earlier, before the fire. But I had expected that he would come back later. Did he go home?”

“No,” said Mrs Andrews. “We don’t know where he is. On the news, they kept talking about ‘two survivors’, and we thought—we thought—” She burst into tears and Mr Andrews put his arm around her shoulders.

“No, don’t worry, he isn’t there,” Jupiter assured her. “He was following a suspicious car. If you call him on his mobile—”

“Jupiter,” said Mr Andrews, “we have called his mobile phone so many times that it should be glowing by now. He did not answer!”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Jupiter said quickly. “I’m sure there is a simple and logical reason why he didn’t answer.”

“Give me one...” Mr Andrews said.

Jupiter was spared giving an answer, because now a doctor came to examine him and Pete. He shone a light into their eyes, nose and ears, listened to their heartbeats, took their blood pressures, and said that apart from a slight over-stimulation, they were fine. He gave them some medication and the ambulance left.

Jupiter looked around. The reporters were still photographing everything that came in front of their lenses, and a large crowd of spectators had gathered behind the barrier tapes. Mr Sapchevsky’s house was a wet, smoking heap of rubble. The trees under which the masked man had attacked them consisted only of charred stumps. The grass, the goose house, the small overgrown garden and the fence—everything was burnt. Pete and himself were completely filthy.

“Yes,” said a voice behind him, “that looks bad. You can thank your lucky stars for coming out of this.”

Jupiter turned around and faced Inspector Havilland. “I’d rather thank the designer of the bunker down there,” he replied soberly. “Do you have any leads on the stolen police car, Mr Sapchevsky and Bob?”

“Still chasing criminals?” Havilland said and shook his head. Then he got serious. “We have several patrol cars out looking for them now.”

“Any news about Bob?”

“Nothing yet,” the inspector said. “Until just now we thought he was down there with you and, well...”

“He was not with us because he went after the gang. He had our mobile phone with him, but Mr Andrews says he did not answer. Look for a yellow Beetle, that’s his car. We have to ____”

“You must first go home and rest now,” Havilland insisted. “The police will take care of everything else. We’ll talk more tomorrow.” He tapped Jupiter on the shoulder and turned away.

“Wait!” cried Jupiter.

Havilland turned. “Yes?”

“The man who ran out of the burning house wore a mask. It dropped off when we collided into him. I have put it on the camp bed in the emergency bunker.”

“Good!” Havilland said appreciatively. “I’ll get it in a minute. Off you go.”

With the help of the police, they made their way through the crowd, which began to disperse. It was well past midnight and Jupiter and Pete could hardly keep their eyes open. During the whole journey back to their respective homes, both boys were fast asleep.

3. Where is Bob?

The next day was Sunday. Jupiter had slept very little and he went straight to Headquarters after breakfast. When he went into the trailer, he saw that the light on the answering machine was flashing. He quickly played back the recording.

“Hello, Jupiter and Pete, this is Inspector Havilland. Please call me back, I’m on duty and in my office.”

Jupiter was just picking up the phone when Pete stuck his head out of Tunnel Two.

“Morning, Jupe. Any news about Bob?”

“Just calling Inspector Havilland.” Jupiter dialled the number and Pete threw himself onto a chair.

Inspector Havilland answered immediately and Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker so that Pete could listen in.

“Hello, Jupiter. Well? Did you get through everything okay?”

“Yes, we’re fine, thank you. Did you find out anything?”

“Yes, three things,” Havilland reported. “Firstly, we found the yellow Beetle in Glenview Industrial Park. The officers checked and asked people in the area, but nobody knew anything about the car or the driver. It’s actually not unusual because from the time of the events, there were not too many people there.”

“What about Bob?”

“No trace yet. We are still looking... but we found his mobile phone—”

“Really?” cried Jupiter. “Where?”

“In the stolen police car which was abandoned somewhere outside Glenview. Tell me, did you track the criminals with a tracking device? We saw a strange box in the Beetle which seems to be a homemade receiver.”

“Yeah, Pete had a bug planted on the police car.”

“Interesting... I’ve got to get someone to remove the bug,” Havilland said. “Anyway, we were at Glenview Industrial Park because we traced the demon mask to a company there by the name of ‘Orient Import’. We located the owner, a Mr Singh, but he couldn’t help us. He sells many of such masks and could not remember the customer. And he has never heard of the name ‘Rashura’.”

“What about Mr Sapchevsky?”

“Yes, that’s the third thing I wanted to tell you. He came back to his house this morning. Two of my officers were there at that time. When he saw what had happened to his house, he suffered a shock and is now staying with friends.”

“Did he tell you what happened to him?” Jupe asked.

“The abductors drugged him and simply dropped him off along the way. We questioned him and he was able to give us a pretty good description of Taylor and the driver. They asked him for a series of numbers. He told them everything he knew, after which they threw him out. He regained consciousness only early this morning and took a taxi home.”

“I hope we get to see him again,” said Jupiter. “His emergency bunker saved our lives.”

“Yes,” the inspector said, “you have been enormously lucky.”

There was a pause, then Havilland cleared his throat. "Uh yes, there's another thing—what about that photograph you were gonna send me?"

"Yes, I have scanned the front and back. Hold on." Jupiter opened his e-mail program and sent it to Havilland.

After a few seconds, the inspector said: "Okay, I've got it. Please hold on... Sergeant, call in Madhu." There was a pause. "Ah, Madhu, come in. Look at this writing. Can you translate this? What language is this, anyway?"

"It is Malayalam, Inspector," came the voice of Sergeant Madhu from the loudspeaker. "It's a language spoken in South India."

"And what do the characters mean?"

There was a pause. "They mean something like: 'Rashura does not forgive,'" said Madhu.

"Interesting," Havilland said. "Thank you, you may go... Jupiter? Did you hear that?"

"Yes, we heard."

"So? What do you think?"

"I wonder what Mr Shreber actually died of."

Pete gasped for air and Havilland growled. "You really have a weird imagination as we policemen do, Jupiter Jones. As far as I know, he had a heart attack. Unfortunately, nothing unusual for a chain-smoker."

"Thank you," said Jupiter. "Will you call us if there is any news?"

"If I have time, maybe. Goodbye." Havilland hung up.

Jupiter switched off the loudspeaker and Pete said: "So another dead end. The mask is of no use to us, the mobile phone is useless, the characters don't mean anything and Mr Shreber wasn't even murdered. What do we do now?"

"We have to find Bob. That's our top priority." Jupiter stood up. "We're going to Glenview."

"But the police haven't found anything there."

"We have to go check it out ourselves," Jupe said. "We don't just rely on information from Waterside police."

"You don't?" Pete asked in astonishment. "Why not?"

"We had talked about that in the bunker. Mr Sapchevsky called the police to inform them of a possible second break-in. And a little later, a police car arrived—but inside was this Taylor, who is not a policeman. How did he know that Mr Sapchevsky had called the police?"

"Because someone had told him! And you really think that someone at the Waterside Police Department had a hand in this?"

"We should at least not exclude this possibility. In any case, we have to check out the industrial park ourselves. Let's go!"

At Glenview Industrial Park, they meandered between parked trucks and vans in Pete's MG.

Suddenly Jupiter called out: "Stop the car!"

Pete stepped on the brakes. "What?"

"That's Bob's Beetle!" Jupiter pointed across the road. "We'll search around here."

Pete quickly parked the MG. They got out and went towards Bob's car.

"There's a green question mark on the pavement!" Pete exclaimed.

"There's another one. Bob left us a trail!" Jupiter had discovered the next question mark twenty steps away. They went off and followed the marks until the point where Bob had

crossed the road.

“Look at that.” Jupiter pointed to the other side of the street. There was the warehouse of a company called ‘Orient Import’! And on the right concrete pillar of the courtyard gate was another green question mark.

Pete blew a whistle. “Well, well, well. The owner claimed to have never heard the word ‘Rashura’, and still sold masks like that.”

“It could also be a coincidence.”

“Do you really believe that?” Pete asked.

“No.”

They walked towards the courtyard gate. It was locked. The courtyard was deserted except for a Doberman dozing in the shade. When they stopped at the gate, the dog raised his head, looked at them and growled.

“We have to get rid of that dog,” Jupiter said determinedly. “Did you bring your lock picks?”

“Yes, of course,” Pete said.

“Think you can get this gate open?”

Pete looked at the lock. The dog rose and crept closer, growling and with his head lowered. “I think so. And how do we get rid of this monster?”

“You can run fast, can’t you?”

“Are you crazy? I can’t run away from a Doberman! That’s suicide! Ever heard of this dog’s hunting instinct?”

“Then use your survival instincts.” Jupiter looked around. “If you lure him into the yard across the road, then run back out fast enough and close the gate, the dog could be trapped there.”

“And what do you do in case he attacks you instead of chasing me?”

“I’ll be hiding behind that truck there,” Jupe decided as he pointed to a truck parked nearby.

Pete moaned. “All right. Wait.” He ran across the road to a freighting company, picked the lock and opened the gate just enough for him and the dog to slip through. Then he came back and started work on the lock of Orient Import. The dog barked angrily and jumped against the gate and Pete pulled his hands back. “Jupe, this dog is a killer!”

“You got any rope in your car?” it came back behind the truck from a safe distance.

“Yes, why?”

“Go get it.”

“Sure, while you rest comfortably hiding there.”

“That will give me time to think,” replied Jupiter unmoved.

Pete grumbled and ran all the way to his car. He dug a rope out of the boot and discovered something else—a bag of doughnuts that he had bought two days ago and had completely forgotten about it. Triumphantly he returned to Jupiter with it. “Look what I found!”

Jupiter made a disgusted face. “I am suddenly not hungry. Throw them away! They’re rancid!”

“But the dog wouldn’t mind!”

Jupiter paused and then grinned. “Of course! Good idea, Pete! Give them to me. I’ll lure the mutt across to the other yard. You figure out how to release him and then get in there yourself.”

Jupiter took the bag and carefully laid a trail of six doughnuts across the road towards and into the opposite courtyard. Then he tied the rope around one of the bars of the gate. With

the end of the rope in his hand, he then sat down in the cab of a nearby forklift truck. "I'm ready, Pete!"

Pete looked at the dog and then at the truck parked nearby. "Okay, here goes," he said as he approached the gate. Growling, the dog stretched his muzzle between the bars of the gate. Pete kept his distance as far as possible as he carefully undid the latch. Suddenly he pulled the gate open wide enough for the dog to slip through and shouted: "Come out, dog!"

Almost immediately, Pete ran towards the truck. The dog shot forward as Pete leapt onto the bonnet of the truck. In desperation, he managed to dodge the snapping teeth of the monster at the last second by climbing onto the roof of the truck. It was immediately clear to Pete how dangerous this mass of muscles and teeth was.

Perplexed, the dog realized that he was now free and his enemy trapped, but he could not reach the top of the vehicle.

Pete then shouted: "Jupe! Call him away from me!"

"Hey dog!" cried Jupiter. "Eat the doughnuts now and fall into our trap!"

The Doberman pricked up his ears and looked around. There was still another enemy straight across the road!

With loud barking, the dog rushed towards Jupiter and ignored every single doughnut on his way. And the First Investigator, who realized at lightning speed that his plan was not working, jumped out of the forklift truck, ran into the yard of the freighting company and slammed the gate behind him.

Meanwhile, Pete jumped off the roof of the truck, ran into the yard of Orient Import and closed the gate.

Now Pete and Jupiter were each stuck in a yard on opposite sides of the road. The Doberman saw himself cheated out of his prey, trotted aimlessly across the road, discovered the doughnuts and enthusiastically began eating them one by one.

"That was a great plan, Jupe!" Pete shouted through the bars to Jupiter. "Do you have another one?"

"Not at the moment!" Jupiter called back. "But part of the plan worked—you got in there! You look for traces while I think of something else!"

Pete just shook his head and looked around. The yard was empty, the warehouse and the long shed next to it closed. Neither vehicles nor equipment could be seen. He trotted off and let his gaze wander over the paved ground, but nowhere was a question mark drawn on it. He heard Jupiter calling the dog and grinned in memory of the record-breaking spurt of the First Investigator, but the grin vanished when he suddenly discovered a small piece of blue fabric on the floor. He picked it up. It was denim. It could of course have come from any trouser leg that had come in contact with the vicious dog's teeth, but Pete thought it might have been Bob's.

"Not good," he murmured and looked around again. "Not good at all."

Where could Bob have gone from here if the dog had attacked him and he had to get out of reach very quickly? There were fresh oil stains on the ground next to the shed. A vehicle had recently been parked here. Pete looked up and estimated the distance up to the shed roof. Bob could have got up there if he hadn't been caught by someone earlier.

He peered through the dirty window of the shed. With some effort, he could make out a few boxes and pallets. He quickly stepped on the window sill and from there he climbed up to the roof. And there, he was rewarded by the sight of another green question mark drawn on the corrugated iron.

He got up and crept on the shed roof to the end. There he discovered the tiny courtyard and the back door. He listened, but only heard Jupiter's voice from a distance, calling the dog

names: "You ugly moth-bitten monster, you flea-infested canine, lazily lying there in the sun. Don't you want another doughnut? Come on, doggy, come on..."

So Jupiter was still busy for a while. Pete jumped down into the courtyard. And from there, he saw a green question mark drawn directly on the door.

A few hand movements with the lock picks and the door was open. Pete crept through and found himself among hundreds of boxes and containers. On the right was an office. The door was open.

Pete wondered if Bob was around here somewhere. He sounded the call of the Red-bellied Flycatcher, which was one of their secret signals. The noise sounded quite inappropriate in the quiet hall, and if someone was here, he would know by now that an intruder had gained access. But if it was Bob, he would know who made the call. Pete took a few steps back, ready to flee immediately.

But everything remained silent. Dust danced in the subdued sunlight that fell through cracks, crevices and some windows that Pete could not see from here.

Now he went all out and entered the office. On the desk was a computer. The Second Investigator switched it on, and while the computer booted up, he looked at the rows of files on the shelf. 'Imports India', 'Imports Indonesia', 'Imports Japan', 'Imports Malaysia'... None of them looked interesting. But there was another folder with the title 'Princess'. This didn't fit in with the rest—unless Orient Import Glenview was also doing business with a daughter of an international aristocracy.

Pete pulled out the folder and leafed through it. There were no trade documents, instead the folder contained several transparent foils with photos always showing the same woman—a very beautiful lady of Indian descent. There was no name or other notes. On the last page, the photograph was a full-body portrait. She had her hair artfully pinned up, wore a tight-fitting black dress, a chain of gold and diamonds and around her left wrist, a whole bunch of diamond-studded gold bracelets.

Pete recognized the woman. He had seen her before—in the photo that had been sent to Mr Shreber. She was the woman in the group of four card players.

He took the photo out, folded it up and put it in his pocket, then he took a look at the computer. As expected, it asked for a password. Pete turned it off again and left the office.

In the middle of the warehouse, there was a free space left for a table and four chairs. Someone had been playing cards and smoking here. There were storage boxes piled up all around, and one of them was open. Pete looked inside and saw that it was full of colourful silk scarves in plastic covers. Two plastic covers had been torn open and thrown aside. The scarves were not in them.

This may or may not mean something. Pete took a crushed cigarette butt and the pack of cards, wrapped them in one of the plastic wrappers, stuffed everything in his pocket and made his way back outside.

He didn't get far. Suddenly he tripped on a loose floorboard and fell face first with a scream.

4. New Information

“I really don’t know whether to laugh or cry about this,” said Inspector Cotta. “It’s Sunday, five minutes before I’m off duty and I’m looking forward to a quiet evening after an unpleasant day. Then you rush in here promptly, telling me that you broke into an Orient Import warehouse in Glenview and set a dangerous beast on the unsuspecting neighbourhood and that Bob has been abducted by some shady people who call themselves Rashura, wear demon masks, commit poison attacks and occasionally steal police cars when they’re not setting houses on fire.

“Instead of going to the Waterside police, where everything there falls under their jurisdiction, you come to me. I’m beginning to understand why my predecessor was looking forward so much to his retirement. I probably have to be thankful that it’s not exactly summer holidays and that you are dragging criminals into my office every five minutes.” He leaned back in his desk chair and gave Jupiter and Pete a sinister look. “I think I’ll just get a transfer to Los Angeles. It’s probably quieter there. Did you damage anything in that warehouse?”

They shook their heads. “It was more like the warehouse damaged me,” said Pete. “I tripped on a loose floorboard and broke all my bones—”

“You just sprained your foot,” Jupe countered.

“And Jupiter was mauled by a devilish mutt when he lured him to the other yard to save me.”

“Pete, don’t exaggerate. He snapped on my arm when I closed the gate in his face.” Jupiter looked at his right arm, which had been cleanly bandaged. “It doesn’t even hurt now.”

“Pete, was there anything interesting in that warehouse?” Cotta asked.

The Second Investigator shook his head. “Just boxes of silk scarves, clothes and carved figures.”

Cotta looked at him piercingly. “I hope you didn’t take anything.”

“Just a few clues,” Jupiter said and Pete took the plastic cover with the crushed cigarette butt and the pack of cards out of his pocket and put it on the desk. “Can you have this examined for fingerprints and the like?”

Cotta nodded. “Of course! The entire police force is at your disposal. After all, we are here equipped with everything and lying on our backs waiting for you.”

“Must you always be so sarcastic?” complained Pete. “We’re worried about Bob!”

“If it makes you feel any better, the manhunt for this Taylor and his accomplices is in full swing and I will indeed immediately take your clues to the lab. Maybe there are still traces to be found, even though you just stuffed everything in your pocket.”

“But I wrapped it in the plastic bag,” Pete argued.

“Never mind.” Cotta got up and went to the door. After an officer had come in and collected the evidence, the inspector continued: “There’s one more thing...” He pulled a computer printout from a drawer and put it on his desk. “This is the information about the licence plate number of this Ishmael you gave me earlier.”

Jupiter took the piece of paper and read it. The grey Ford Mustang was not registered to an individual named ‘Ishmael’. It was a company car registered to the Pima Air & Space Museum in Tucson, Arizona.

“What do you know? An air & space museum!” Pete blew a whistle. “Now that can’t be a coincidence!”

“I have heard of this museum,” Jupiter said. “There are hundreds of mostly scrapped aeroplanes and helicopters, including Navy fighter planes.”

Then the First Investigator turned to the inspector. “It says here that the contact person is a Miss Ruth Parker. Had she reported the car stolen?”

“No. I called her. She works in the museum and the car is one of those that their employees use.”

“So Ishmael is one of the employees of the museum,” said Pete.

“Does he have something to do with Rashura?” Cotta asked.

“I don’t think so,” Jupiter said quickly. “Thanks for the information!” He folded up the printout and pocketed it. “What are you gonna do about Bob now?”

“I’ll inform the Waterside police. I’ll suggest that they search the warehouse and interview the owner again, this time in more detail. It may be that he actually sells dozens of demon masks every day, but he will have to explain the green question marks in his warehouse.”

“He will claim that they come from rioting youths,” Pete said. “And after that, he will report us.”

“Believe me, Pete,” Cotta said, “abduction is a very serious matter. We will not be turned away so easily.” He took one look at his watch and sighed. “So much for my plans for this evening. You go home now, I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Just one more question,” said Jupiter. “Pete, show him the picture of the—uh... princess. Do you know this lady, sir?”

Cotta looked at the photo and his eyebrows moved upwards. “No. She looks Indian, but I have no idea who she is. A princess, you say?”

“I was hoping that you might know her. Thanks anyway.” Pete put the picture back in his pocket.

Cotta looked from Pete to Jupiter and shook his head. “Out with it, boys. This matter is too serious to keep half of it from me again. What does this woman have to do with your case?”

“We don’t know,” said Jupiter. “And we are only hiding half-baked suppositions. I promise you that we will come to you as soon as we have the facts.”

“That is exactly the problem! As soon as you have the facts, you’ll be in trouble again, and you won’t always be able to rely on us fishing you out at the last moment! One day it will go wrong, Jupiter Jones!”

“We will be very careful, sir.”

“Boy,” said the inspector, “if you were my son, I would send you to a boarding school in Greenland. But even there, you’d probably get into the path of some dangerous criminals!”

“Even then I would inform you as soon as I have the facts,” Jupiter replied unperturbed.

“Out!” Cotta said.

5. The Demon

When Jupiter and Pete arrived back at Headquarters, the answering machine light was flashing. Jupiter switched the machine on.

“This is Professor Meeker. You had left me a message. I’m sorry I’m only now getting back to you, but I was on a research trip and just got back yesterday. I hope it was nothing important. Just give me a call. I’m in my office today until 8 pm.”

Jupiter turned on the loudspeaker and dialled the number. After a short time the professor answered: “Yes?”

“Professor Meeker? This is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators.”

“Jupiter! Hello! How are you and your friends? Are you in the middle of a case again?”

“Yes, and we wanted to ask you whether you are perhaps familiar with Asian languages, more precisely, Malayalam.”

“My dear Jupiter,” the professor interrupted him amusedly. “That is not my language area, I’m sorry. If, on the other hand, you wish to know about American Indian languages—”

“No, Professor, thank you very much. We need to check with someone who is well-versed with Malayalam.”

“Then I can give you the number of my esteemed colleague Mrs Amrita Chakyar. She teaches Malayalam at the university. Unfortunately it is Sunday today and I don’t think she is in her office. Is it urgent? Otherwise you could contact her tomorrow.”

Jupiter managed to convince the professor that the matter was urgent. Professor Meeker agreed to contact Mrs Chakyar at home to get her agreement first. Five minutes later, the professor called back and gave Jupiter Mrs Chakyar’s home number, and the First Investigator immediately called her.

It took a while before a woman’s voice answered. “Hello?”

“Mrs Amrita Chakyar?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes?” The voice had a distinct accent.

“My name is Jupiter Jones. I was referred to you by Professor Wilton Meeker. He said you could help me with a translation from Malayalam.”

“Yes, he just called me and said that it was urgent. What is it?”

“May I send you an email or a fax? It’s just a few words.”

“Certainly.” Mrs Chakyar did not sound particularly enthusiastic, but she gave him her email address. Pete opened up their email program, attached a scanned copy of just the phrase from the photo and sent it.

After a short time, she said: “Yes, I have it. Oh, I got it.” Her voice suddenly changed. “This is very unusual... hmm... Where did you get this message?”

“It’s actually not a message by itself, but something written on the back of a photograph. Can you please translate the text?”

“Certainly,” said Mrs Chakyar. “It says: ‘Star of Kerala’.”

“Are you sure?” Jupiter asked in surprise. “Doesn’t it say something like ‘Rashura does not forgive’?”

“Pardon? No. Did anyone tell you that?”

Jupiter and Pete exchanged a silent glance. "Yes, but that is not so important. Do you know this star?"

"I've heard about it." Now the voice sounded very restrained. "But who said that there was anything to do with Rashura? That would be in a bad taste."

"Why? Who is Rashura?"

"It is a demon from Hindu mythology which, like many myths, involves bloody affairs—gods wage wars against demons, bodies are dismembered, Kali dances on the corpses of her enemies and so on. Rashura, being a higher demon, was so unimaginably cruel that it horrified even the gods and other demons. They hunted him down, killed him and threw his body into the sea at the deepest point. Then they erased the memory of his name.

"He lay in the sea for a few hundred thousand years and then he awoke again. Because his name had been erased, he himself no longer knew who he was. He swam ashore and set out to rediscover his name. He found the first syllable bound in the crown of a goddess. He killed her and took the crown for himself. Then he found the second syllable in the belt of a demon king, whom he also killed.

"With the crown and the belt, he managed to find the last syllable bound in the cloak of Vishnu, a supreme being and one of the principal deities. He fought against Vishnu but could not defeat him and Vishnu took away the crown and belt from him. Rashura had to flee and eventually hid in a cave. And there he lurked and waited for the day of his vengeance. Anyway, that's the myth behind it."

"Charming," commented Pete sinisterly.

"Nowadays it is considered extremely improper to use or mention this name, as Vishnu himself has banned it," said the linguist. "It surprises me that someone has given the name to you as part of a translation, even though it is not there. Who are you? What is the meaning of all this?"

"I'm an investigator," said Jupiter. "My two colleagues and I call ourselves 'The Three Investigators'. We have worked with Professor Meeker before, and deal with secrets and mysteries of all kinds and—"

"So I see..." Mrs Chakyar interrupted him. "And how did you come across the demon and the Star of Kerala?"

"It's a long story," said Jupiter. "Someone engaged us to locate this item but did not give us sufficient information about it. What is this Star of Kerala?"

"Kerala is an Indian state where, incidentally, I am from. The Star of Kerala is a huge padparadscha sapphire—one of the rarest of sapphires. It is also known as the 'Burning Crystal' because the light refracts so strongly in it that it looks like it is on fire. It was part of a treasure that belonged to an Indian maharaja but it was stolen in the second half of the twentieth century along with a number of other very valuable gemstones. Individual diamonds and rubies have been rediscovered, but the Star of Kerala remained lost. In fact, almost nobody outside of Kerala knows about this story. It is very unusual that you have come across it and I can only warn you to be careful."

"Warn us to be careful? About what?"

"The person who gave you this false translation," said Mrs Chakyar. "I don't know what he was trying to do, but Rashura is... something very evil. If this has something to do with it, you have to be very careful. It's better not to get in his way."

"We have already got in his way," said Jupiter. "There is a group of people who call themselves Rashura, and they have abducted our friend." However, Jupiter refrained from telling her that they had also burned down Mr Sapchevsky's house and put him and Pete in mortal danger.

Mrs Chakyar inhaled sharply. "Then you must go to the police immediately. People who name themselves after one of the cruellest demons and are looking for the Burning Crystal certainly know no mercy!"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you very much. You've been very helpful."

"I wish you good luck," said Mrs Chakyar in a gloomy voice. "You will need it."

Jupiter hung up.

"What now?" Pete asked anxiously.

"Now we know what we're looking for." Thoughtfully, Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "So, Mr Shreber did have a treasure."

"The Star of Kerala," Pete said. "But how did he get such a precious sapphire? And did he really want us to find it? What is the right thing to do? What mistake should we fix? And what do Ishmael and Madhu and all these people have to do with it?"

"Madhu may have wanted to warn us." Jupiter booted up the computer and searched for Kerala on a map. "Well, well... Kerala is the state where the port city of Kochi, formerly known as Cochin, is located. Madhu definitely knows something and doesn't want us to go into this case. Firstly, The Three Investigators have never given up on a case and secondly—"

"—We have to find Bob," Pete completed the sentence.

"Exactly."

"What are you looking for now?" Pete asked.

"I'm searching the Internet for 'Star of Kerala' and 'Burning Crystal'." Jupe frowned at the result. "Nothing. Mrs Chakyar was right, this is not mentioned anywhere, neither under one name nor under the other. This is very unusual for such a valuable gemstone."

"There is this book *Famous Gemstones and their History* in the library," said Pete.

"Maybe there's something about this stone in it. I could rush over and have a look."

"You could if it wasn't Sunday."

"Oh, you're right!" Pete remarked. "Anyway, I can go to Miss Bennett's house and tell her it's an emergency, she'll probably let me into the library!"

"Well, you can try," Jupiter nodded. "I'll think about our case while you do that. Come back or call me if you have information."

6. A Touch of Poison

Bob woke up with a pounding headache. He was sick, the world was spinning, he couldn't see and could not move. It wasn't the first time something like this had happened to him, so he quickly realized that he was lying blindfolded and bound in a stuffy hot little room that was swaying slightly. And the nausea was probably an after-effect of the potion the criminals had drugged him with.

He vaguely remembered a seemingly endless car journey through the night, moments of almost waking up, and the disgustingly sweet raspberry taste of the potion that had forced him back into darkness again and again. The taste had stuck to his tongue and he had kept very still and listened. If he had revealed to them that he was awake, they might have stunned him again immediately. He felt as if he had been asleep for years.

He realized with a dull relief that the car ride, this endless nightmare in a state of twilight, was over. The slight bobbing and rocking of his pad and the soft splashing of water told him that he was in a boat. Judging by its movements, the boat was not very big, but it was not a row boat either, so it was probably a small yacht. And since the movements were always stopped with a short jerk, the boat was anchored and was not drifting on the sea.

The abductors had also kindly placed him on a bunk instead of simply throwing him on the floor, so they didn't want to harm him—at least for the time being. But why had they taken him with them in the first place?

He tugged at his shackles, but they did not give way. Then he tried to push the blindfold up over his eyes by rubbing his head against the mattress.

“If I were you, I would not do that,” said a woman’s voice right next to him.

Bob froze and his heart suddenly pounded up to his neck. He hadn’t noticed that there was someone else in the cabin besides him.

“Who are you?” His voice sounded hoarse. “What are you gonna do with me?”

“That depends entirely on you. If you do what we tell you, we might let you go.”

“Might?” Bob asked.

She just laughed, and this laughter sent cold shivers down his spine.

He knew that voice. How? When had he heard it before? He tried to remember... and then he remembered. The only woman he had come across in this case so far was the one who poisoned Mr Mason in hospital... and he would expect her not to hesitate to do the same to him.

He absolutely had to flee from this boat! Jupiter and Pete would definitely look for him... or were already looking for him. He had no idea how much time had passed since the men in the warehouse had drugged him. Maybe he could get some useful information out of his guard with a few clever questions.

“How long have I been here?”

“A few hours.”

“Can I have something to drink? I feel sick.”

“Just don’t get seasick here.” Instead of getting up, going out and giving him a chance to free himself of his shackles, she knocked three times loudly against a wooden surface, probably the door. Steps could be heard above somewhere so she was not alone.

Someone opened the door and the woman said briefly: "Water for the boy."

"Aye," said a man and Bob heard him leave. After a short time, he came back, then the door fell shut again.

"You can sit up," said the woman and Bob straightened up. When she put a bottle to his lips, he thought for a moment about throwing himself against her and pushing her off balance—but then what? He was still tied up and had his blindfold on so he couldn't even open the door, let alone do anything against the man on deck. Anyway, he didn't have a chance if these people wanted to hurt or poison him. He couldn't stop them but the woman had said that they might let him go.

The woman took the water bottle away. Bob remained sitting upright and she did not force him to lie down again. "Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome."

"Now will you tell me what you want to do with me?"

"Tell me what you were doing in that warehouse," the woman said.

"A bet," Bob lied. "I made a bet with my friends that I could get past the dog."

"And your search for an item of a Mr Shreber from Waterside has nothing to do with it?"

Bob remained silent in dismay and the woman laughed briefly. "Never mind. I would have tried it too. I know all about you. You call yourselves 'The Three Investigators' and you received a series of clues with numbers. What are the numbers?"

"I can't remember."

"That is unfortunate," said the woman. "I guess we'll have to sink you in the sea with a stone at your feet after all. What a pity—I had hoped you would be reasonable." She knocked on the door three times.

Bob became freezing cold. "What? No! Wait!"

She did not reply. Horrified, he heard the man's footsteps approaching. The door opened. "Yes?"

"Our young friend here does not want to work with us," the woman said. "Take him up on deck."

"No! Wait!" cried Bob. A hand grabbed Bob by the collar and effortlessly dragged him to his feet. "Wait! I'm telling you!"

The woman laughed again. "How predictable you are, little investigator."

The hand let go and Bob sank back onto the bunk. His heart pounded against his ribs and he could hardly breathe.

"Well?" said the woman.

"Moby Dick... and some numbers," Bob said. "But I can't remember the numbers."

"Moby Dick? Are you trying to make me look stupid?"

"No. It's some kind of code."

"Did Ishmael say that?"

"No, he just—" Bob faltered, but it was already too late.

The woman blew a soft whistle. "So you know Ishmael."

"No, that's not true. We—ow!" The hand had grabbed him by the collar again. "We don't know who he is! We've only seen him once!"

"Let him go. You can go," the woman said.

The man obeyed wordlessly and disappeared. Bob sank back onto the bunk and gasped for air.

"What do you know about us?" asked the woman coolly as if nothing had happened.

"I have no idea who you are." He hoped it didn't sound as defiant as he thought it would. "I don't know your voice and I don't know what you look like."

“Whatever you say.” She seemed to think for a moment. “Then I’m gonna give you some names and you’re gonna tell me what you know about them... Shreber.”

“A former Navy fighter pilot. He’s hired us to find something... but we don’t even know what it is.”

“And?”

Bob noticed that his T-shirt was sticking to his back. Desperately, he racked his brains. “And... it has something to do with that aeroplane that was in his backyard.”

“And?”

“That’s all I know!”

“Taylor.”

“This is the man who posed as a police officer to get some documents from us.”

“And?”

“And he stole a police car.”

“And?”

“And he lured Mr Sapchevsky out of his house.”

“And?”

“That’s all I know.”

“Ishmael.”

That was almost worse than at school. Bob was scared and he didn’t know which of his answers were already known to these people and which were not.

“What did Ishmael tell you?” the woman continued.

“He told us to look for a piece of paper on the plane. This was the pawn receipt for a watch.” He swallowed and wondered if she also knew that Gerry had stolen the note from them. But then he stopped. If this woman was working with Taylor, she must have known what the note said because Gerry had said that Taylor had taken it from him. Or had it not been Taylor in the end, but someone else? After all, Gerry’s description had been pretty sketchy.

The woman continued on by mentioning another name without being moved.

“Moby Dick.”

“That’s the name of the white whale in a book by Herman Melville.”

“Ahab.”

“The captain who hunted the whale.”

“Ishmael.”

“I just told you that—oh! You mean from the book? Ishmael is the narrator of the story, but it’s probably not his real name. And in the end he’s the only survivor, I think.”

“Madhu.”

Bob hesitated. “He is... a policeman. Sergeant Madhu. He’s with the Waterside Police Department.”

“And?”

“He translated the text on the back of a photo for us.”

“What is the text?”

“‘Rashura does not forgive’.”

There was a longer break.

“I wonder what you’re trying to achieve,” the woman finally said in a silky smooth way.

“Wh—what?”

“I thought I made it clear to you that I’m not going to be lied to.”

“What? But I didn’t lie! We called the police and Sergeant Madhu translated the text for us! You must believe me.”

“What does the word ‘Kerala’ mean to you?”

Would this questioning ever end? “Nothing at all. Who is he?”

“Anuradha?”

“Also nothing.”

“Rashura?”

“That—that’s you, isn’t it? Some kind of organization that’s after what Mr Shreber has been hiding.”

“Ishmael,” said the woman.

Bob was silent. He had told her everything he knew—hadn’t he? Was there not something else after all?

“Ishmael,” she repeated.

“That’s all I know.”

“Then listen to me carefully now,” said the cool female voice. “You will find this Ishmael and bring him to a place I will name. You have two days.”

Bob could not believe his ears. “You... you’re letting me go?”

“Yes, and to make sure you don’t let me down, we’ll make a deal.”

Without warning, something painfully pricked his arm and he cried out involuntarily. “Ow! What was that?”

“This is a way of getting you to cooperate,” said the woman calmly. “It will be slow but reliable. Today is Sunday. If you come back on Tuesday, I’ll give you an antidote and you’ll stay alive.”

Bob became sick with horror. “Poison? You gave me—”

Without paying attention to him, the woman knocked on the door again. The man came down, and she ordered: “Take the boy ashore.”

“Aye. However—”

“Wait!” cried Bob. “You can’t do this! What happens if I don’t find him in that time?”

“Make an effort to find him... and do not go to the police. No one but me can give you the antidote.”

“Ma’am,” the man interjected. “There’s bad news. The boss just called. There was a fire at Sapchevsky’s house and it was burned down. There were probably some kids in there.”

“Kids?” she asked sharply. “What kids?”

Bob did not hear the answer. He felt sick. Blood was booming in his ears and he suddenly had the feeling that he was about to keel over. As his head cleared, he heard the woman say: “Darn! Take the boy ashore. We’re leaving!”

The man grabbed Bob and threw him over his shoulder like a sack of flour. He carried him up a narrow staircase, put him in what should be a small motorboat, let it down into the water, and then climbed in himself. He started an outboard motor and the boat shot forward.

Bob let everything happen to him, stunned by the shock. After a short time, the boat crunched over sand. The man pulled Bob out and loosened his shackles. Soon after, he was gone and Bob heard the sound of the motorboat disappearing quickly.

Bob sat up. It took a while for his trembling hands to loosen the bonds, and then he tore off the blindfold. At first he saw nothing because the low sun blinded him. With his eyes squeezed together he looked around and gradually he got used to the light. He found himself on a lonely sandy beach, bordered by a long mountain slope. No one could be seen. A white yacht swayed on the sea a hundred metres away, turning and quickly moving away, disappearing in the flickering sunlight.

He stood up and noticed that his legs were shaking too... no wonder—those people had poisoned him! And the woman had not told him where to take Ishmael to when he had found

him. He had to see a doctor immediately... or go to the police... or go back home. He was hungry and thirsty and had no idea where he was. And Jupiter and Pete were—no... don't even think about it!

He had to leave the beach and his only option seemed to be climbing up the hillside. With a bit of luck, there had to be a coastal road somewhere! In the hot, soft sand, he could only move forward with difficulty, and when he finally reached solid stone ground, he had to rest for a while. Then he climbed on until he reached the top and could look around in all directions.

There was no road, only a sandy path that meandered through shaggy greenery to the horizon. In front of it, the ground sank back down again in a gentle curve and ended at another empty beach. The hill was a single rocky outcrop stretching into the sea, and at its furthest end, it stood alone in the void.

7. Bob is Back!

“The Star of Kerala,” Pete read from the book he had just borrowed from the library. “A sapphire from the possession of a maharaja in the Indian state of Kerala. It is also called the ‘Burning Crystal’ because of its extraordinary refraction... blah blah blah... 480 carats. Basically, the rest was what Mrs Chakyar had told us, Jupe. What does carat mean again?”

“For gemstones, that’s the weight. One carat is 0.2 grams, so 480 carats is 96 grams. That is enormous—the Star should be almost as big as a plum. The Koh-i-Noor, for example, one of the oldest and most famous diamonds in the world, is only about 106 carats. There are not as many famous sapphires as diamonds, but the Russian tsars had a whole collection of blue sapphires and the largest of them weighs 260 carats. So our Star should be extremely valuable.”

“I always thought all sapphires were blue,” Pete remarked.

“Such gemstones are formed from a mineral called corundum. The red varieties are called rubies, whereas the non-red ones are called sapphires. However, when most people think of sapphires, they think of them as blue, but they also come in pink, green, yellow, orange, and so on. In our case, the Star of Kerala is a padparadscha sapphire, and it has a mix of pink and orange colours,” Jupiter paused. “Anyway, I’ll call Inspector Cotta now.”

Pete immediately closed the book. Jupiter was about to pick up the phone when it rang. Quickly he grabbed it. “The Three Investi—”

“Jupe!” cried a distant voice through a terrible murmur. “It’s me, Bob!”

“Bob!” Jupiter shouted and Pete jumped up. Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker.

“Is Pete there too? I’m so glad! I thought you two were dead!”

“What happened?” Jupe asked with excitement. “Where are you?”

“In Mexico, in an oyster farm. At least here, they have a phone—” The noise became louder and they could hardly understand the next words. “The police will pick me up right away... airport, my father has organized everything... I was running all day... I will be back tomorrow and I only have until Tuesday... to find Ishmael!”

“What? Why do you only have until Tuesday? What about Ishmael? What happened?”

“You must find Ishmael for me! Now!” cried Bob into the phone, but he was barely audible. “These criminals have—” The rest was lost in noise and then the connection was broken.

Jupiter and Pete looked at each other in amazement. Then Jupiter took a look at his watch. “Almost 10 pm now. We can still make it.”

He dialled the mobile number Ishmael had given them. In the next moment, a recorded voice came up: “We’re sorry... You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service.”

“What?” Jupiter exclaimed. “He has disconnected the number! Wait let me check the number I dialled... Yes, it’s correct! He is trying all ways to prevent us from contacting him!”

“What about the museum?” Pete recalled. “What’s the name of the contact person?”

“Ruth Parker,” Jupiter said, “of the Pima Air & Space Museum.” He took out the piece of paper Inspector Cotta gave him. “Here’s the phone number of the museum, but I don’t have

much hope of contacting someone there as it is so late on a Sunday night. I'll try anyway..."

Jupiter called and reached a security guard. "Ruth Parker? Yes, she works here. You can contact her tomorrow at nine o'clock."

"Could you please give me her home number? It's very urgent—"

"Out of the question. We do not give out private numbers. Call in the morning."

"All right. Do you have someone named Ishmael working for you?"

"Ishmael? Nope. Never heard of him. Who's that supposed to be?"

"It's all right," said Jupiter. "Thanks." He hung up and pinched his lower lip. "I wonder why Bob wants us to find Ishmael immediately. We are looking for him anyway."

"We won't find out today," said Pete. "I must go home. I'll see you tomorrow at school!"

Jupiter nodded absent-mindedly. When Pete was gone, he sat down at the computer and checked the museum's website. Aerial photographs showed hundreds of aircraft, sorted into groups, standing on a gigantic runway. It was an impressive sight, but it didn't help him.

He then looked for an online edition of the book *Moby Dick* and started reading.

"Jupe!" He flinched when Pete's elbow hit him in the side.

"What? Did I fall asleep?"

"Not quite yet," whispered Pete, "but you have just dropped away so picturesquely to the side. What have you been doing all night?"

"Reading," mumbled Jupiter. "I know everything about whaling now. Did you know that ambergris is formed from the undigested remains of squid?"

"No, and I don't want to know!"

A stern gaze of their history teacher met them both and they then tried as conscientiously as they could to take an interest in the heroic past of the United States. During the break, they called the Pima Air & Space Museum and asked for Ruth Parker.

After a few seconds, a young sounding female voice came up. "Parker, here. Who is this?"

"My name is Jupiter Jones," said Jupiter, who could hardly keep his eyes open. "It's about a car from your museum, a grey Ford Mustang." He gave the licence plate number. "Can you please tell us who drove the car to Los Angeles last Wednesday?"

"Pardon? Why? Who are you? Are you with the police?"

"No, miss. I am an investigator. We're looking for the driver—"

"Yeah, I got that. Is he involved in a hit-and-run or something?"

"No. Please just tell us his name. It's important! Is his name Ishmael?" At the other end of the line, it became very quiet.

"Ma'am? Hello? Are you still there? Please answer."

"Just a moment please," Miss Parker said curtly and immediately afterwards a happy band warbled a song about the joys of sporty beach life into Jupiter's ear.

Disgusted, Jupiter held the handset away from him and gave it to Pete. "You take over. I don't feel up to it today."

Stunned, Pete picked up the phone. "Hello? Jupe, there's nobody there... hello?"

"Hello," said a man's voice. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"Mr Ishmael!" cried Pete. "This is Pete Crenshaw of The Three Investigators. Listen, we really need to talk to you... if possible today. Can you come here?"

Ishmael laughed briefly. "You must be joking. I'm not going to Rocky Beach to have a conversation with you."

“But it is important! Something happened to Bob and he said we have to find you! Also... hey!”

Jupiter had snatched the handset from Pete without a word. “Sir,” he said. “Rashura almost killed us on Saturday night. Our colleague was taken to Mexico. We now know that it’s about the Star of Kerala, which is also known as the ‘Burning Crystal’, and Mr Shreber has engaged us to look for some clues and then find you. It is imperative that we meet you.”

“Out of the question,” said Ishmael. “In the beginning, I played along but not anymore. Stay out of it. It is far too dangerous for you.”

“But sir, it’s urgent! Our colleague—”

“No,” Ishmael said and hung up.

Jupiter put down the handset of the school telephone and frowned.

“Great, Jupe, just great,” Pete said angrily. “If you just need a secretary, just let me know anytime! Am I your telephone lackey or what?”

“Excuse me,” said Jupiter. “I just wanted... but that’s not important now. Come.” He turned around and marched to the exit.

Stunned, Pete ran after him. “What is it now? Jupe, we’re about to start chemistry. You can’t just—where are you going?”

“To look for Bob.”

“I bet he’s not home yet!”

“Then we’ll wait for him. We need to know what’s going on!”

“Fine,” grumbled Pete. “For this, you have to do my next chemistry homework!”

“I won’t do that, but I’ll let you copy my work.”

They cycled to Bob’s house, but nobody was there. So they sat down on the stairs in front of the door and waited.

After a short time, a neighbour came by. “Are you waiting for Bob? He is not there. I think they took him to hospital—the poor boy!”

They jumped up, grabbed their bikes and set off.

As Jupiter’s condition did not allow him to cycle up the hill on which the hospital was situated, they went to Pete’s house and got his MG, and ten minutes later, they were at hospital’s reception.

“Bob Andrews,” Jupiter said to the nurse who was at the reception. “He should have arrived today.”

She looked. “Yes, here. Room 512. But he’s still in Toxicology, you can’t go there now.”

They had already started to run, but Jupiter suddenly stopped and turned to the nurse. “Did you say toxicology?”

“Toxicology Department,” she confirmed. “For poisoning of all kinds.”

“Thank you.” Jupiter and Pete looked at each other. Both turned pale as they thought of the same thing.

“Mr Mason was poisoned,” Pete said in a panicky voice.

Jupiter nodded. Without another word they ran to the lift.

In front of room 512, Mr Andrews walked up and down with quick steps. He looked angry, bitter and worried, and his face did not lighten up when he saw Jupiter and Pete stepping out of the lift. “There you are. What devilish situation have you got yourselves into this time?”

“What about Bob?” Jupiter asked back instead of an answer. “How is he?”

“Not good at all. Those criminals have given him some unknown poison! Nobody knows what it is, and there might not be any antidote in America!”

“India,” Pete said. “Try some Indian antidotes.”

“That’s what Bob said, but so far the doctors have not been successful. And they can’t just administer a mix of all kinds of antidotes. That’s just dangerous.”

“What happened?” Jupiter asked.

“They took him to Mexico and interrogated him on board a yacht. Then they gave him a poison and said he had to bring a certain Ishmael to them within two days, and only then they would give him the antidote. But then they suddenly changed their mind and left! What kind of beasts would do that to a boy?”

“We will find them,” said Jupiter.

“You do nothing!” Bob’s father shouted angrily. “You have done enough already!”

“Mr Andrews, we know what these people want. I can assure you—”

“Jupiter,” said Mr Andrews, “I know how capable you are. I have seen you in action myself. But now Bob’s life is at stake, and the police will take over! Do you understand that?”

“Yes, sir,” Jupiter said, depressed. “May we at least wait here?”

“Yeah, sure...” Tired, Mr Andrews rubbed his eyes. “What a nightmare.”

They could only agree with him there. Even if Ishmael could be persuaded to meet with them, it would be of no use since the criminals had fled. They were in deep trouble—and this time not even the police could help them.

8. A Suspicious Police Officer

It took Bob two hours to get out of the examination room with his mother and a doctor. Bob was wearing a white hospital gown and looked deathly pale. His right arm was strangely stiff. Bob's father, Jupiter and Pete, who had been waiting impatiently at the uncomfortable visitor's area, stood up.

"The doctor wants to talk to us," Bob's mother said to her husband and gave Jupiter and Pete a gloomy nod. "You take care of Bob."

"Of course," said Pete.

The three adults disappeared into the doctor's office and The Three Investigators entered room 512, where Bob fell onto the bed. "Am I glad to see you! On the yacht, they said that Mr Sapchevsky's house had burned down and my parents said that the fire fighters rescued you from some underground room. Is that true?"

"Yes, but that is not so important now," said Jupiter. "What happened to you?"

"I drove after the stolen police car. That was not so easy because they had to lose a real police car in between. They must have dropped Mr Sapchevsky off. Unfortunately, I didn't realize that and continued to chase them. At Glenview Industrial Park, they drove into the yard of a company called 'Orient Import'. I sneaked up behind them, but they had a dog—and that's where they caught me."

"We know about that dog," Jupiter said grimly, "because we followed your question marks. Did you find out anything?"

Bob closed his eyes and thought. It all seemed so long ago and the events were overlaid by the poisoning. He forced back the fear. "Besides the man with the dog, there were three other men there. The boss is a grey-haired man in his mid-forties. Then there was Taylor, and another man that looked like a bodyguard. They didn't say very much. Then they drugged me and put me on a yacht. There was this fake nurse who poisoned Mr Mason. I was blindfolded so I could not see her but I recognized her voice. She asked me loads of questions—about Ishmael, Mr Shreber, Sergeant Madhu, and even Taylor! Then she continued asking me whether I knew some strange people, Kerala and... some name beginning with 'A'—Anna... no, Anu—something. Then it was back to Ishmael.

"Jupe, she wanted to meet Ishmael badly, so I don't think they are in cahoots." He shivered involuntarily. "I was to bring Ishmael to them... and to make sure that I would do so, she gave me that poison. She would tell me where I should take Ishmael to. There, she would give me the antidote, before the poison kicks in the next day. It was then when a man came and said that Mr Sapchevsky's house had burned down and some kids were in it. They were very frightened, and just brought me ashore and left. Somehow, they decided to drop the issue with Ishmael.

"I walked along the coast all day and half the night and finally came across an oyster farm. They wouldn't believe me there, but at least they let me make a phone call." Bob tried a grin, but it didn't work. "Jupe, if this woman doesn't contact me by tomorrow, you'll need a new business card the following day."

"Rubbish," Jupiter said decidedly. "We will find a solution."

“Oh yes, there’s one more thing I found strange,” Bob continued. “When I told the woman that the translation of the text on the photo was ‘Rashura does not forgive’, she accused me of lying to her.”

“Actually, the text is not that,” Jupiter revealed. “It says ‘Star of Kerala’. A colleague of Professor Meeker translated it for us.”

“What? But that means that Sergeant Madhu lied to us!” Bob exclaimed.

“That’s right,” Jupiter said. “This Star is a valuable sapphire, also known as the ‘Burning Crystal’. That’s what that gang of people are after. So Sergeant Madhu is now our most important lead since Ishmael refuses to talk to us even after we managed to contact him. Madhu knows something. He’s probably even up to his ears in it.”

“But there’s still something I find strange,” Jupe continued. “We thought that a member of Rashura had set the house on fire... but if your abductors didn’t know it, then who was responsible for the fire? And do you know whether your abductors are members of Rashura?”

“Maybe not,” Bob said. “That woman also asked me about the Moby Dick numbers—”

“Did you tell them?” Jupiter asked.

“No. I don’t have a photographic memory like you,” Bob said. “Anyway, I thought she should already know those numbers if she was with Rashura... but we still don’t know who or what Rashura is...”

“Yes, we do now.” Jupiter quickly told him what Mrs Chakyar had said.

“So it’s really a demon!” Bob swallowed. “The woman on the yacht gave me the creeps.”

“To get back to the house,” Pete said hastily, before the talk of demons went too far, “maybe there is someone else who is after the Star of Kerala. I hope you still know your way around, Jupe, because I’m beginning to lose track of things.”

“We will now take care of Sergeant Madhu first,” Jupiter decided.

“Fine,” Bob said, trying not to sound desperate. “Good luck... and hurry!”

“Ah, the bunker boys are here,” grinned Inspector Havilland as Jupiter and Pete entered his office at the Waterside Police Department building. “Nice of you to show up. Did you get through all right?”

“Yes, sir, thank you,” Jupiter replied.

“And how is your friend? My colleague Cotta informed me that he had turned up in Mexico. He was lucky—many people disappear and never turn up again.”

“He is doing well despite the circumstances,” Jupiter said. “Sir, may we speak to Sergeant Madhu? We want to ask him something.”

“Sure,” Havilland said, went to the door and called for Sergeant Madhu. “Is it confidential? Would you like to speak to him in private?”

“No, please stay with us.”

Sergeant Madhu came in and stopped when he saw Jupiter and Pete. He showed no surprise, looked at them only briefly and turned to his superior. “Sir?”

“The boys want to ask you a few questions, Madhu,” Havilland said and sat down behind his desk. “I confess, I’m curious to know what this is all about.”

“It’s about the translation you gave us.” Jupiter watched Madhu closely.

However, the policeman just looked at him blankly and said: “Yes?”

“You said that the words were ‘Rashura does not forgive’. But that is not true. We asked an expert on the Malayalam language, and she told us that it says ‘Star of Kerala’. Why did you tell us otherwise?”

Havilland raised his eyebrows, but he said nothing. Sergeant Madhu looked at Jupiter coolly and finally said: "Because the Star of Kerala is none of your business."

"But Rashura is our business..."

"Rashura is also none of your business," Madhu affirmed. "You are just a couple of little boys playing investigators. That is not your job. Catching Rashura is the job of the police."

"Wait a minute," said Inspector Havilland. "Who or what is the Star of Kerala?"

"A very precious sapphire," replied Jupiter as Madhu was silent. "It disappeared many years ago. We suspect that the people who call themselves Rashura are after it. To get it, they have poisoned our friend. Since I know where the gemstone is, I am willing to cooperate with them if they give us the antidote to save Bob immediately."

Madhu, Havilland and Pete stared at Jupe.

"You know where the gemstone is?" Pete asked in amazement. "And you say it just like that?"

"Why not? There is no danger—they won't bug this office," Jupe said confidently.

"The boy is talking nonsense," said Madhu brusquely. "The Star of Kerala is lost. If that's all, sir, I'd like to get back to my work."

"No, wait Madhu, I want to talk to you." Havilland turned to Jupiter and Pete. "Okay, it was nice to see you boys again, but I've got work to do. See you some other time!"

They had no choice but to leave the office. No sooner were they outside the door than Pete hissed: "Are you serious? You know where the gemstone is?"

Jupiter looked around, but no one was there. "I have a hunch, but I'm not sure," he replied softly. "I am curious to see how Madhu will react."

"So we'll wait now?" Pete asked.

"Right."

"What if he doesn't react at all?"

"He will," said Jupiter.

"We don't stand a chance at all if he is cooperating with the crooks."

"I know, but we have to do something," Jupe decided. "We can look around his house, for example."

"You want to break into a policeman's house? But you do know that such people are armed and can use their weapons?"

"We just have to be careful and not get caught," Jupiter said.

Pete shook his head. "You'll never change."

They sat down in the MG, watched the police building. Again and again their thoughts wandered back to Bob. They only had one day, and what could they do if Madhu led them to a dead end?

"Then only Ishmael remains," said Jupiter.

"You want to go to Arizona?"

"If we have no other choice, yes."

An hour later, Sergeant Madhu left the building and got into one of the police cars parked in front. Pete and Jupiter followed him at a suitable distance until he stopped in front of a house barely ten minutes later. He unlocked the door and went inside. The two investigators got out and looked around. One of the ground floor windows was open and they carefully crept up, ducked under it and listened.

Madhu was on the phone. He spoke very quickly in a foreign language, and if the words 'Kerala' or 'Rashura' were said, they were not clearly recognizable. Madhu seemed angry.

He hardly gave the other person on the line the time to answer, and after almost yelling at him at the end, he hung up the phone abruptly.

There was someone else in the room, and that someone seemed to be suffering from a particularly bad cold or vocal cord infection. The voice was a little more than a croaky whisper that hurt just listening to it. Madhu replied brusquely. He seemed to wander around the room. His voice grew louder and he stopped right by the window. Jupiter and Pete ducked lower into the bushes.

The phone rang and this time Madhu answered in English. "Yes? ... Yes, of course I was expecting your call. ... Ah, good. Listen, what's the story with those three boys?" He listened for a while, and then he said: "No... Only two of them. They said the third one was poisoned. What happened? ... This Jupiter Jones told me he knows where the gemstone is... The stone, yes... How should I know? They want to cooperate if they get the antidote... Yes, exactly... I have no idea whether he is telling the truth or not... Yes... Yes... No, I don't think so... Yes, I understand the situation here... Anyway, we're stuck with these boys now..." He took a longer break and just listened. Finally, he said: "Yes, that's probably the only way. I will take care of the three master investigators. See you later." He ended the conversation. It was silent for a few seconds.

Suddenly the mobile phone in Jupiter's trouser pocket rang loud and clear.

Madhu rushed to the window. At that same moment, Pete and Jupiter shot up and ran away.

"Stop!" Madhu yelled after them. "Stop!"

They did not even think of obeying a law-enforcing officer. Pete dashed across the street —right in front of a passing car. Brakes screeched, Pete made a huge jump to the side, fell, rolled off and ran to the MG. Jupiter dodged the car, ran on and jumped into the passenger seat of the MG, not caring about the indignant driver.

Pete immediately started his car, accelerated and with squealing tyres, the MG raced down the road.

9. Elijah's Warnings

Two streets away, Jupiter said: "Stop the car, Pete."

Pete, who of course was already driving calmly and in a mannerly order, frowned. "Why?"

"We should think about what to do now," Jupe said.

"And you can't do that while I'm driving?" Pete argued. "What if this guy comes up behind us?"

"He's still a cop! There's not much we could do."

Pete steered the MG to the side of the road and stopped, but kept looking in the rear-view mirror. "Can't we talk to Inspector Havilland? If we tell him that Madhu belongs to Rashura, he can arrest him or do something to save Bob."

"And what good would that do? Do you think Madhu is carrying an antidote?"

"What do I know?" Pete exclaimed. "Jupe, the day is almost over and we have achieved nothing! What should we do now?"

"Think," Jupiter said calmly.

"I'd rather run amok!"

"That wouldn't help Bob."

"Gee, Jupe, sometimes I could—"

"That wouldn't help Bob either," Jupe interrupted.

"Then what?"

"We have missed something," said Jupiter, without going into it. "There's one lead we haven't followed yet..."

"And what is that?" Pete asked provocatively. "Ishmael won't talk to us, Madhu is corrupt, Taylor has disappeared, Rashura has taken off in a yacht, the plane is useless, the mask doesn't help us, Shreber's house is full of rubbish, Mr Mason is in hospital, Gerry is an annoying idiot, Mr Sapchevsky's house is burned down, the watch is gone, the mystery is unsolvable, and if you want to now claim that Jim Cooper has something to do with it—"

"Sapchevsky!" Jupiter sat up. "We should definitely talk to Mr Sapchevsky again."

"And how are we gonna find him if he's staying with friends that we don't know?"

"I'm sure Inspector Havilland can help us there... but not today. We'll have to wait till Bob's all right."

"One day has passed," said Pete. "It will be dark soon... and we don't have anything, not one clue!"

"Yes, we have... Sergeant Madhu."

"Who will probably arrest us immediately the next time we run into him. This darn mobile phone! Who called anyway?"

Jupiter pulled the phone out of his pocket and took a look at the display. "Hmm... the number is unlisted. I could—"

At that moment, the phone rang again. Jupiter quickly held it to his ear. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Beach Café, Rocky Beach," someone said. The voice sounded muffled, as if through a pillow, and was obviously disguised. It was impossible to tell whether it belonged to a man or

a woman. "Bring the stone. At midnight. No police, or your friend is gone."

"Understood," said Jupiter. "We'll be there."

The person hung up.

"Who was that?" asked Pete.

"Rashura, I think. We're supposed to be at the Beach Café in Rocky Beach at midnight."

Pete gave a deep sigh of relief. "And I thought they were long gone! Now we can help Bob after all!"

"Don't rejoice too soon," Jupiter said soberly. "They want us to bring the stone."

"What?" Pete stared at him in disbelief. "But we don't have it! Actually, you never said that we have it—only that you know where it is!"

"Not even that is true." Jupiter looked darkly into Pete's eyes. "I'm just guessing. And even if my guess is correct, it won't be easy to get to the stone... especially not within six hours."

"Where is it? Or where do you think it is?"

"Moby Dick."

"Excuse me?"

"Moby Dick," Jupe repeated. "The two clues that we have both say 'Moby Dick' followed by a series of numbers."

"But Moby Dick is a whale!"

"I know," Jupiter said. "I think it's an alias, just like Ishmael... but whatever it means, I'm reasonably sure that's where the stone is hidden."

"And you want to tell Rashura that?"

"What other choice do we have?"

"And if it is not enough for them? What if they don't give us the antidote?"

"Then we have half a day to think of something else," Jupe said glumly.

Pete shook his head. "There's one more thing," he said. "After we heard Madhu say to someone on the phone that you knew where the stone was, the next moment, we received a call from someone telling us to bring it out. This can't be a coincidence. Clearly Madhu is involved with the Rashura people."

Jupe said nothing and Pete started the engine.

They made a short detour to the hospital, but were not allowed to visit Bob. So they drove to the salvage yard and slipped through Green Gate One so that Aunt Mathilda wouldn't see them. Neither Jupiter nor Pete was in the mood for dinner, but that didn't stop Jupiter from eating a packet of chocolate biscuits while searching the Internet for information on Hindu mythology, various poisons, gemstones and types of aircraft. Pete lay in his armchair, threw a rubber ball against the wall and made biting comments.

Around 11 pm, they both could not stand it any longer. Jupiter packed a video camera, which he had received for his birthday, and a towel. Then they left Headquarters, got into the MG and drove to the beach.

The Beach Café was an ugly building, consisting almost entirely of billboards and shop windows. During the day, one could buy anything from ice cream, hamburgers and pizza to fish, and for the few tourists who wandered into this part of Rocky Beach, there was a souvenir shop with tasteless and overpriced kitsch. At this time everything was quiet, the shutters closed, and the lights turned off. The big car park was empty. Occasionally, a car drove by on the coastal road. In the distance, sirens went off every now and then before being drowned by the roar of the ocean waves.

Pete let the MG roll into the car park, stopped, switched off the engine and headlights and looked at his watch. "There... we have less than an hour. What do we do if it was just a

stupid trick and nobody comes?"

"They will come." Jupiter said. "After all, they want the stone."

They peered across the car park, but apart from a late walker with his dog, no one was to be seen. Jupe placed the camera on the dashboard, turned it on and adjusted it to cover the area in front of the car. Then he draped the crumpled towel over it until only the lens was visible.

"Very unobtrusive," said Pete.

"Next time I'll hide the camera in a half-bitten hamburger," Jupiter said.

"You can't expect me to believe that you can just bite off half a hamburger."

"Not mine? It will be yours," Jupe quipped. "I'm on a strict diet of bread rolls and minced meat."

That at least elicited a faint grin from Pete. But immediately afterwards, it disappeared again and he straightened up. "Someone is coming! Already? But it's not midnight yet!"

Quickly Jupiter switched on the camera and they got out.

A man in ragged trousers and a threadbare jacket shuffled across the car park towards them. He wore a black scarf around his neck. As he approached, Jupiter and Pete saw a gaunt, stubbly-bearded face, with pockmarked cheeks.

The man stopped at some distance. Jupiter and Pete positioned themselves against the car so that they did not block the camera's view.

The man looked from Jupiter to Pete and reached out his hand. His index finger poked through the air like a harpoon. "I must warn you, comrades!" His voice was rough, hoarse and obviously disguised, and he clearly smelled of liquor.

"Really?" Jupiter said politely. "About what?"

"About the path you are taking... It will only bring you disaster!"

"And what path is that?"

The man came one step closer. "The *Leviathan* will soon sink into the depths of the sea. No one can follow it there, not Ahab, not Ishmael. Do not try!"

"The Leviathan?" Pete asked in bewilderment. "What is that?"

"Moby Dick," Jupiter replied succinctly. "Are you saying we should stop looking for the Star of Kerala, sir?"

The man narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice to an ominous whisper: "The stone you seek was obtained through treachery and deceit at the cost of a life. It burns, it glows in unholy fire—the colour of blood! Forget it! Do not follow this path! Otherwise flaming waters will devour you!"

Pete swallowed, but Jupiter remained unmoved. "Good, we understand that. Thank you, Elijah."

The man laughed hoarsely, turned around and shuffled away.

"Elijah?" hissed Pete. "What is this? How do you know that guy's name?"

"I'll explain to you," Jupe said, "but let's get back into the car first."

When they got back into the car, Jupiter switched off the video camera.

"Now what were you going to tell me?" Pete asked.

"The way that guy dressed and spoke tells me that he is playing some sort of a game based again on the novel *Moby Dick*," Jupe explained. "In the book, there is a character by the name of Elijah."

"Why Elijah?" Pete asked. "Who is he and what has the character got to do with us?"

"I'll tell you later as this guy is not the one that we are supposed to meet here," Jupe said.

"Why?" Pete wondered.

“He didn’t ask for the stone,” Jupiter said and pinched his lower lip. “He was here to warn us not to proceed with the case. It’s better that we sit quietly inside here and be on the lookout for someone else to come. Then we see what happens. It’s almost midnight now.”

10. The Antidote

A few minutes later, a black car turned off the coastal road into the car park and slowly rolled closer. The headlights flashed once before the high beam was turned on. Jupiter and Pete were suddenly blinded by the bright light. Very quickly, Jupiter pressed the record button on the video camera. Both of them stepped out of the car and positioned themselves as before.

The black car stopped. For a few seconds, only the running engine could be heard. Then the passenger door opened and someone got out. They couldn't recognize the person's face as he stood at the door, but they recognized his voice immediately. It was Taylor.

"So... the stone, if you please."

"First, the antidote," said Jupiter in a firm voice.

Taylor laughed without a trace of humour. "No, boy. You've messed with us too many times. Give me the stone first, and then you'll get the antidote."

"And who can guarantee me that it's really an antidote?"

"Nobody," Taylor said, "but if we really wanted to kill your friend, we would have tied him up and thrown him overboard."

Cold shivers ran down the boys' spines.

"We just want to get you out of the way," Taylor continued. "Your stupid interference has unnecessarily complicated the whole thing. So, give me the stone, we'll leave and you'll never see or hear from us again."

Jupiter took a deep breath. "I'm afraid you might have misinterpreted what Sergeant Madhu told you. I don't have the stone."

Again only the engine could be heard. Pete was tensed up and held his breath. He realized that that running away now would not help them.

Finally, Taylor slowly said: "You don't have it?"

"No," said Jupiter. "But I know where it is... and I'll tell you if you give me the antidote."

"Where is the stone?"

"The antidote, please," Jupiter said and reached out his hand.

Taylor was about to say something when he was interrupted by the opening of the driver's door. Someone got out, but as with Taylor earlier, the driver's face could not be seen behind the glaring light.

"You're smart, boy," said a strange voice. It was a terrible voice—soft and threatening like the hissing of a cobra. "You know we can't just shoot you down when the answer is in your head... but were you thinking of your friend?"

Pete froze. Even Jupiter was not half as sure as he thought he was.

"So... do you really want to commit murder for this gemstone?" Jupe asked.

"I will do what I have to do," the man replied in a cold voice. "You are witnesses and normally, witnesses are not left alive. Your only saving point is that you don't know half as much as you think you know. Now, where is the stone?"

Jupiter felt Pete's gaze on him and replied as calmly as he could: "The person known to us as Ishmael has given us many hints connecting with Moby Dick. Since I think it is unlikely

that he is talking about a real whale, I suspect that it is a ship. However, we do not know exactly which ship it is.”

“Is that all?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Jupe replied. “That’s all we know... Honest.”

“There,” said the man quietly and thoughtfully. “I guess we’ll have to take care of this Ishmael after all. He will not like that.” Without another word, he got into the car and closed the driver’s door.

“Wait!” cried Jupiter. “What about the antidote?”

Taylor bent down inside the car and said something to the other man. About fifteen seconds later, he straightened up and said: “Okay, we’ll be fair to you. You told us where the stone is, so we’ll tell you where to find the antidote, but it won’t be straightforward. Since you like riddles, I’ll give you one.”

He was silent for a moment and seemed to think it over. “Between heaven and earth, but now belongs to neither, just sitting behind a closed gate.” He thought again, then he laughed. “Yes, that will do. Go figure it out if you want to save your friend.”

He got in and closed the door. In an instant, the engine roared and the car shot forward. At the last second, Jupiter and Pete threw themselves to the side. The driver hit the brakes hard and the car stopped barely half a metre from the bonnet of the MG. Immediately afterwards, it backed up, turned around and roared away.

Jupiter, who had slipped painfully over the asphalt with his hands and knees, got back on his feet. “Are you okay, Pete?”

“Since he didn’t shoot me after all, I feel great,” Pete growled and pulled himself up.

“Anyway, we have learned a great deal in return,” Jupe said.

“What use is that to us? We do not have the antidote! Just a stupid riddle that we can never solve! Do you know how many ‘closed gates’ there are here in Rocky Beach alone?” Gradually he realized the full extent of the dilemma. “We can’t help Bob anymore!”

“Certainly not if we go crazy now,” said Jupiter brusquely. He returned to the car, fished the video camera out from under the towel, stopped it, and played the recording back.

Elijah was as easy to see and hear as he was positioned well for the video recording, but after the black car had rolled into the car park, there was only a glaring light and the hum of the engine that drowned out the voices. Only at the end did they hear Jupiter’s voice: ‘Wait! What about the antidote?’

Jupiter leaned on the bonnet of the MG, pinched his lower lip and thought. “A ‘closed gate’...”

“Forget it,” Pete said bitterly. “We’ll never solve this.”

“We have to attempt to solve it because as it is now, that’s the only way to save Bob,” Jupe insisted. “Now, what kind of ‘closed gates’ do you have in mind?”

“At this hour? School, police, car park, museum, Orient Import...”

Jupiter thought about it, but shook his head. “I don’t think they know that we know where Orient Import is...” He paused and then said: “They thought we were bringing the stone. If they were indeed fair as they had claimed—”

“—Which most likely meant that—” Pete interrupted.

“—They had the antidote with them,” Jupiter finished the sentence. “I just don’t believe that they really want to kill Bob. So they have just made up their minds at short notice and are only now going to hide the antidote in a place where we have to find it—behind a ‘closed gate’...”

“Between heaven and earth,” Pete added, “but that can be anywhere!”

“You forgot the second part—‘but now belongs to neither’. So it’s neither heaven nor earth. Then it can’t be a house or a building?”

“Not a tree or a mountain.” Gradually, Pete got involved in the idea. “They are all part of the earth, quite clearly. But what could—”

“I’ve got it!” Jupiter shot up. “Pete! We are such idiots! Let’s go!”

“What? But... where?”

“Get in the car!”

“Yeah, sure, but—” Pete quickly got in and Jupiter threw himself into the passenger seat.

“Where are we going now?” Pete asked.

“Pete, think! ‘Between heaven and earth, but now belongs to neither’! Well?”

“Jupiter, I don’t know! Just tell me!”

“The aeroplane!”

“The—” Pete stared at him, then he slapped his flat hand against his forehead. “It’s behind the ‘closed gate’ of the salvage yard!” He started the engine and accelerated.

Minutes later, they turned the corner towards the salvage yard and just saw a car disappearing in the distance. Pete stopped in front of Red Gate Rover, Jupiter activated the secret mechanism, and both of them entered the salvage yard. They ran through the piled up mountains of scrap metal and everyday objects to the plane. This time Pete didn’t even think of lifting Jupiter up. With elegant momentum, he pulled himself onto the wing. Jupiter handed him a flashlight and he shone it around in the cockpit.

There was nothing.

“Anything?” cried Jupiter from below.

Without a word, Pete jumped back to the ground and ripped open the side door. He shone the flashlight around in the inside of the plane.

The light fell on a small medicine bottle made of brown glass which had been placed on the floor in the middle. Pete let out a scream. “There it is!” He reached in and grabbed the bottle.

When Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda appeared at the window of their bedroom to see who was making such a racket, Jupiter and Pete were already on their way to the hospital.

11. What's the Connection?

Now that Bob was safe, there was relief all round for Jupiter and Pete. They had already retrieved Bob's car back from Glenview Industrial Park.

Although the First Investigator was thinking about the case all the time, he had to temporarily stop investigations in order to recuperate from the events of the past days. More so, there was work to be done on the plane. As Bob needed to recover at home, the work had to be split between Jupe and Pete.

It was not easy to persuade Bob's parents to let him out of the house in the first place. It wasn't until Wednesday afternoon that he was allowed to drive to the salvage yard and meet Jupiter and Pete for a discussion of the situation. He still looked pale, and he reacted quite irritably to questions about his health.

Jupiter came straight to the point. "Here's what we have found out so far—Rashura is after a large sapphire that disappeared in Kerala decades ago. Harry Shreber either had it in his possession or knew where it was. To ensure that no unauthorized person finds it, he hid it, leaving only a few meagre clues in several places. He also seems to have given Ishmael some clues. However, Ishmael refuses to cooperate openly with us, but still gives us all sorts of hints revolving around the novel *Moby Dick*."

"Elijah did that as well," Pete added. "You think that guy has anything to do with Ishmael?"

"Yes, because I could see the connection." The First Investigator made a hand gesture towards the computer. "Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* is now fully on the Internet and you can read it there. In chapter nineteen, Ishmael and his shipmate Queequeg encounters a mysterious man who gives them some cryptic messages that sounds more like gibberish. That man's name is Elijah. He wears threadbare clothes and has a black scarf tied around his neck." He turned the screen around so that Bob and Pete could see it. Using an image processing program, Jupiter displayed a section of the video recording at the Beach Café. The image showed Elijah in all his flimsy, black-necked splendour.

"Hmm..." Bob said. "You could be right."

"Exactly," Jupe affirmed. "In the book, Elijah appears to warn Ishmael and Queequeg about the dangers ahead for them, and this was exactly what our Elijah did. He played that part in accordance with the book, only that the scenario is different."

"I still don't really get what that chap was trying to tell us," Pete said. "What about that name he mentioned, Le—something..."

"Leviathan," Jupe said. "This term can mean simply anything of immense size. It was originally used in the Bible to refer to an enormous sea monster. In the novel, Ishmael uses this term frequently when he refers to *Moby Dick* and to whales in general."

"So I believe, in this context, both 'Moby Dick' and 'Leviathan' stands for something else—a different idea or theme," Jupe continued. "In that respect, my best guess is that of a ship—only that I do not know which ship it is."

"I remember that he said 'the Leviathan will soon sink into the depths of the sea', and that 'no one can follow it there'," Pete recalled.

“Yes,” Jupe said. “I have it on the video recording although the audio is soft since the video camera was inside your car.”

“Also, Elijah specifically warned us not to look for the stone,” Pete added, “and after all that has happened to us so far in this case, I take it very seriously! We have used up all our luck!”

“I take it seriously too,” Jupiter agreed.

“He also said that the stone has already cost someone’s life,” Pete continued. “I remember he said very clearly that it was ‘obtained through treachery and deceit at the cost of a life...’ and some ‘flaming waters’ will devour us if we continue. Frankly, I am fed up with flames!”

“Let’s decide later,” Bob suggested. “Because I have the feeling that we are still in the dark. What leads have we not yet followed?”

“Since you were temporarily absent, I’ve written down everything we know so far.” Jupiter gave him and Pete a hard copy each. “We don’t know who John Fisher is. We don’t know if there is any connection with the mayor of Waterside’s son, who probably broke into Mr Shreber’s house and stole the box full of model planes. We don’t know what this princess has to do with all this and if it is even important. And we don’t know who burned down Mr Sapchevsky’s house.”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked in amazement. “I thought it was Rashura! Or Taylor!”

“No way it was Taylor,” Jupiter said. “After all, he was travelling with Mr Sapchevsky and then he went to Orient Import.”

Bob nodded and said: “The fire was certainly not part of Rashura’s plan. As soon as that fake nurse on the yacht heard that the house had burned down, she gave up her plan to get to Ishmael through me and threw me out!”

Jupiter leaned back. “And if you just want to find some numbers, you don’t usually burn down a whole house.”

“But then who did it?” Pete wanted to know. “I would like to thank him—with a hook to the jaw!”

“I’d rather put him behind bars,” Jupe said. “But right now something else is more important. We must find Ishmael before that gang does, and we have already lost two days.”

“We wouldn’t have lost that time if my mother hadn’t driven me crazy,” Bob said. “If she had her way, I would still be in bed now.”

“Who is this Ishmael?” Pete asked. “Let me get this right—you think Ishmael and Elijah are accomplices?”

“Or the same person who, for some reason, hides behind names of literature characters,” Jupe said.

“Just call him,” Bob suggested.

“I did that yesterday,” Jupe confirmed. “More precisely, I called his museum. The lady tried to forward me again. I told her she could just tell me Ishmael’s real name, but she ignored that. And Ishmael didn’t answer the phone.”

“Something must have happened to him,” said Pete gloomily. “Rashura has probably got him.”

“Or he wouldn’t talk to us,” Jupe added.

Bob put his legs on the table. “So how are we gonna get to him first?”

“By being smarter than Rashura,” Jupe replied.

“To be honest,” Pete said, “I don’t care who is smarter after they left you, Bob, alive only because you knew too little!”

“Do you want to solve this case or not?” Jupe argued.

“I would like to stay alive,” Pete said.

“We’ll do that as well... Listen, fellas, here’s what I’ve come up with—”

That was as far as he got. A deafening screeching noise nearby made all three of them jump up in shock.

“What is that?” cried Pete.

“The circular saw again!” Jupiter yelled. “Jim must have set it up right next to our pile of junk!”

“That’s very thoughtful!” cried Bob over the infernal noise. “Let’s get out of here!”

They escaped through Tunnel Two to the open-air workshop, but even there, they could only communicate by hand signals. Bob pointed to Green Gate One and they crawled through it, out to the street.

“This simply can’t be true,” Pete burst out. “Is this guy trying to chase us away? Jupe, you have to talk to your uncle!”

“Maybe he didn’t do it on purpose.” Jupiter did not sound very convinced. “But I was about to suggest that we visit your grandfather anyway.”

“My grandpa?” Pete stared at him in amazement. “Why?”

“Because he was a friend of Harry Shreber,” Jupiter explained. “Maybe he can help us understand this connection with Moby Dick.”

12. The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup

Ben Peck, Pete's grandfather, warmly welcomed The Three Investigators. He was a slender, wiry man who didn't look his sixty years. They had been good friends since they all went on an adventurous trip across the United States.

Mr Peck was a passionate inventor. He immediately showed The Three Investigators his latest invention—a remote-controlled lawnmower that would not race into the flowerbeds and destroy everything there. Then he invited them to have juice and biscuits on the terrace.

"Harry Shreber?" he said when they explained to him why they had come. "Let me see. First, we were good friends, but that rascal still owed me fifty dollars when he died. Besides, he was a darned bad loser at poker. Could never stand it when I laughed at him."

"Grandpa," said Pete, "if someone laughs at you after you have lost a game, you'll go for his throat and then report him to the police for fighting back. You're not exactly a good loser either."

"I am not a loser at all," said Mr Peck triumphantly. "I have an excellent and sharp mind, unlike Castro and Jacobson, for example, who only play chess and poker with me else they would be wandering around and moaning from morning to night. Some people think of retirement to mean that they only wake up for dinner. Not me!"

"No, certainly not," Jupiter agreed and pulled the Cochin photo out of his pocket and showed it to Mr Peck. "Do you know any of these people?"

Pete's grandpa looked closely at the photo and then pointed to one of the three men. "Yes—this is Harry— younger than when I first knew him, but I'm sure it's him. The other two men and the woman, no, I don't recognize them." He gave the photo back to Jupiter.

"What can you tell us about Mr Shreber? Has he ever shown a preference for the novel *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville?"

"Not that I know of. He didn't read much at all. Just collected junk and grumbled about my inventions. Why the whale of all things?"

"You know that Mr Shreber has left us something..."

"Yes, Pete already told me something about a note and an aeroplane. I'm not quite sure what that is all about. Can the plane at least fly? If so, I will register for the next sightseeing flight. But if I know Harry Shreber, that thing is a piece of junk."

"That's right," Pete admitted. "It's an ancient fighter plane, which I think he flew around in it during his assignments in Asia. But now it is held together by rust. Don't you know any people who might know something about Mr Shreber's past?"

"I can ask Castro," said Mr Peck. "He dragged him into our circle. Of course, only because Harry Two—that's what we called Harry Shreber because Jacobson's name is Harry as well, so he was Harry One, of course... uh yes... I was saying because Harry Two played even worse poker than Castro did, and Castro hoped to win back the twelve million Harry Two owed us."

"Twelve million dollars?" cried Bob.

Mr Peck snorted. "That's nothing. I once owed Jacobson five hundred million! That was a long streak of bad luck."

“No wonder the economy is going downhill,” said Pete. “I always thought it had something to do with the banks, but it’s just four elderly men gambling away half the state budget. I’m just glad you never got your hands on real money!”

“Don’t get cheeky,” Pete’s grandfather said to him. “Of course I have paid him back everything, and in the meantime he is in debt to me. There... So what else do you want to know?”

“We are looking for someone called John Fisher from Mr Shreber’s past,” said Jupiter, “and we’re hoping someone knows what the references to Moby Dick are all about.”

“Fine.” Mr Peck poured himself another glass of water. “Count on me, boys. If Castro doesn’t know anything, we’ll just have to ask around a little more. We’ll figure it out!”

“Ask not only Mr Castro, but please also ask Mr Jacobson,” Jupiter said quickly. “And ask them both to ask several friends as well, and so on. That way we can be sure that the news will spread. Someone must know this John Fisher!”

“Yes! That’s our good old Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup!” Pete exclaimed.

The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup was an invention of Jupiter, which The Three Investigators had successfully used many times in their previous cases. It worked in such a way that each of the three called their friends and told them what they wanted to know. These friends then called other people and they in turn, called more people so the enquiry was spread very quickly. The participants of this Hookup are known as ‘ghosts’ since they could be anyone.

Now Pete was beaming as his grandfather would be starting a Hookup. “In this case, we’ll call it the ‘Grandpa-to-Grandpa Hookup’!” he quipped.

Arriving back at Headquarters, Jupiter tried to call Ruth Parker in the hope of getting to Ishmael again, but nobody answered the call. So they finally went to the plane because Aunt Mathilda threatened to ‘throw it into the scrap press’ if it didn’t leave the yard soon. So far there had been only one interested buyer, but he had not shown up again.

Pete cleaned the dirt and debris from the cockpit, Bob sanded rust from the undercarriage, and Jupiter, who had drawn the shortest straw, swept the spiders from the fuselage with a thick broom. At least they could hear their own voices again since the circular saw was not in use as Jim had left for the day. However, The Three Investigators found that Jim had removed the corrugated iron roof under which the tunnel from the Cold Gate to Headquarters passed and leaned it against the storeroom. They had immediately put it back in place and knew what to expect when Jim came back to work the next day.

They were thinking about how to handle Jim when Pete suddenly looked up and said: “We have a visitor!”

A man walked across the yard towards them. It was Mr Mason.

“Hello,” he said as he reached them, looking critically at the plane. “Dear me. It’s even rustier than before—or is it just me?”

“Hello, Mr Mason!” Bob said as the three of them left their positions and stood in front of the former secretary. “Are you all right now?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I got out of the hospital the past weekend.” Mr Mason clasped his hands. “I wanted to thank you. I don’t remember anything, but the doctor said that you gave him the tip about me being poisoned so they could give me some medication very quickly to revive me. Thank you.”

“That was the least we could do,” said Jupiter and the other two nodded.

“Maybe I was lucky that you were there,” said Mr Mason. “If there’s any way I can help you, let me know, huh?”

They nodded.

"And how's the investigation going on?" Mr Mason asked. "Have you found out anything about the Burning Crystal yet?"

"No," Jupiter said immediately. "We only know that a whole bunch of people are after it. But we do not have the slightest idea where it could be."

That was new to Pete and Bob, but in the presence of a third party, they knew the First Investigator well enough not to point out his contradiction. So they suppressed all surprised exclamations.

"Pity," said Mr Mason. "I only hope Mr Shreber had not pushed you too far with this."

"We are doing our best, Mr Mason," assured Jupiter.

"Did you find out anything about the people in that photo?"

"Uh, no. I'm afraid it's not that simple as well," Jupe said.

"Well, I guess I'll be going," Mr Mason said. "I wouldn't want to hold up your work here. You'll call me if you find out anything, okay?"

"Of course we will!" Jupiter said almost indignantly.

The former secretary turned around and walked away. From his high seat, Pete looked at him leaving. "He's just gone past the gate," he reported after a minute. "Jupe? What was that all about? Why didn't you tell him what we know?"

"I had a strange feeling," Jupiter replied. "Didn't you notice it? He asked us about the Burning Crystal. As far as we know, he knew nothing at all about the stone! We never mentioned it to him before, so how did he suddenly say that name? Doesn't that seem strange to you?"

Bob and Pete winced. "That's right," Bob said. "That's funny. Does that mean he's somehow connected to Ishmael and Elijah? But he said all the time that he had no idea what this case was about!"

"He definitely knows something," said Jupiter. He drank a bottle of water empty, put it down and wiped his mouth. "Interesting that he doesn't tell us what he knows."

They went back to work. Jupiter swung back up the side door to continue his battle with the spiders. Bob scraped off some more rust and Pete dropped another piece of glass into the bucket placed below him.

Suddenly, Bob pointed to a lamp that was attached to the wooden fence which had just started flashing. "The phone is ringing!"

Hastily the boys left the plane, slipped through the Cold Gate and arrived at the trailer just as the answering machine took over the call. Jupiter interrupted it by picking up the handset and switched on the loudspeaker. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

It remained silent for a while.

"Hello?" cried Jupiter. "Hello? Who is there?"

"Hello?" it finally came back like an echo. The voice was old and fragile. "I don't know if I'm calling the right number. This is probably all nonsense. Who are you?"

Jupiter braced himself with patience. "My name is Jupiter Jones from the detective agency 'The Three Investigators'. Can I help you?"

"Me? No. That's not why I'm calling. There's nothing wrong with me, despite the doctors constantly tinkering with me. After all, I just turned eighty! That's four years above the national average!"

"I'm glad to hear that, sir," Jupiter said politely. "May I ask your name and why you are calling us?"

"Huh? What do you mean? Oh, yeah. My name is Raffer—Gene Raffer... from Waterside. You're looking for somebody who knows John Fisher and Harry Shreber. Well, I

don't know this John Fisher, but I went to India with Harry Shreber."

"In Cochin, Kerala?"

"Yes, exactly. Well, old Harry's gone now, right? Are you related to him?"

"No, sir. I'm trying to solve a mystery he left behind."

"A mystery, huh?" said Mr Raffer. "Yes, he would have enjoyed that. He was a bit strange... yes."

"Mr Raffer," said Jupiter, "we are trying to find out if Mr Shreber or Mr Fisher were ever stationed on a ship called *Moby Dick*. Do you know of such a ship?"

"*Moby Dick*? No," Mr Raffer said. "We were on the *Dauntless*—an aircraft carrier, 26,000 tonnes. *Moby Dick*? Ridiculous. That's no name for a ship."

"Could there have been a whaling ship?"

"Boy, I was a fighter pilot, not a writer. And our captain wasn't called Ahab and he didn't have a wooden leg. If that's what you wanted to know, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I only called because Harry Shreber was a buddy of mine."

"Thank you, sir," said Jupiter. "May I ask you something else? Do you play poker?"

"Poker?" repeated Mr Raffer. "No. Harry might have played, but I didn't."

"Did you happen to know any of his poker buddies?"

"No. Only the princess."

"The princess?" Jupiter exclaimed. Bob and Pete listened intensively.

"Yes. I didn't know her real name. A local girl, I think. Beautiful and rich. Harry called her the princess. Maybe she really was one."

"Is she alive?"

"I do not know. After we left Cochin, Harry never spoke about her again. He got really angry when I asked him about her once."

"Who could possibly know anything about her?"

"His other buddies, perhaps... or you could ask Nathan Holbrook."

"Who is that?" asked Jupiter.

"He was a mechanic on the *USS Leviathan*, which was also at the dock in Cochin. He was a very young lad then. Harry was friends with him."

The Three Investigators stared at each other. "*Leviathan?*" Jupiter repeated weakly.

"Yes... that helps us. Do you happen to know where Mr Holbrook lives?"

"Somewhere in Arizona, I think... but I don't know exactly."

"Thank you, Mr Raffer. Goodbye, sir."

Jupiter put down the phone and looked around the trailer.

"What are you looking for?" Pete asked.

"For a wall I can hit with my head on," Jupe exclaimed. "There I was, wondering what ship it was, and Elijah actually told us! '*Leviathan*' was not just what is mentioned in the book, it is also the name of a ship!"

13. Too Many Suspects

Bob sat down at the computer, turned it on and searched for images of the *Leviathan*. “There she is. An aircraft carrier, nearly 22,500 tonnes, home port San Diego.”

Jupiter and Pete looked over his shoulder.

“Very nice,” said Jupiter. “Somewhere on this ship is the stone. So we just have to go aboard and look for it.”

“Yes, that’s not a problem at all for us to get into a heavily guarded Navy warship,” said Pete sarcastically.

Jupiter stared at the monitor for a while. Pete took the opportunity to get another bottle of water from the fridge. When he had thrown himself back into the armchair, Jupiter emerged from his thoughts and nodded. “I see it like this. We followed a large number of suspects who threw obstacles in our way... and we made the mistake of letting Rashura distract us.”

Bob snorted at the word ‘distract’, but Jupiter continued: “We should have concentrated only on Ishmael from the beginning—after all, Mr Shreber’s riddle clearly directed us to him.”

“But Ishmael wants nothing to do with us now,” Pete said. “In fact, he is even avoiding us.”

“Oh, that was just for show. Looking back, there were several times he gave us exactly the minimal clue we needed to move on. It’s not clear to me what he’s trying to do, but we’ll find out.”

“But we can’t get to him if he doesn’t answer the phone,” Bob objected gloomily, “and maybe it’s already too late, and Rashura has got him.”

“I have already thought about that,” Jupiter said. “I’ll try calling Miss Parker again now. She knows who Ishmael is. I will tell her that he is in danger and he should call us.”

However, no one answered the call and there was no voice mail service. “I will try again tomorrow,” Jupe decided.

“And what are we going to do about the princess?” Pete pulled the folded and badly battered photo out of his pocket and put it on the table. “I can’t shake the feeling that she has a part to play in all this.”

Jupiter took the Cochin photo from the desk drawer and put on the table as well. Thoughtfully they looked at the black-haired woman.

“I wonder if she’s still alive,” Bob wondered.

“This was the last picture in the folder,” said Pete.

“And was there a name somewhere in the folder?” Bob asked.

“There was no name, only photos. Obviously, whoever collected the photos didn’t need a name.”

“So now we have four tracks,” said Jupiter. “Mr Mason, who may not have told us everything he knows; Nathan Holbrook, with whom Mr Shreber had become friends; The *USS Leviathan*; and the princess—if she really is one.”

Bob drank Pete’s water bottle empty and put it on the table. “I can search the *Los Angeles Times* archives for reports about this lady. If she is—or was—prominent, I’m sure there are some articles.”

Jupiter nodded. "I'll check on the *USS Leviathan* and try to locate Nathan Holbrook."

"And what are we going to do about Mr Mason?" Pete asked.

"We'll discuss it when we meet here tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay." Pete stood up and stretched. "Then I go home and hide myself from anything that has to do with Rashura. Good night."

However the next day, they did not find the opportunity to call Ruth Parker, to investigate further or to meet up as planned. Uncle Titus had hired three extra helpers in addition to Jim to help clear Mr Shreber's house and sort out the stuff.

As soon as Jupiter, Pete and Bob arrived at the salvage yard after school, they were ordered by Aunt Mathilda to pile up the boxes by the fence. They were busy doing this until the evening. In between, Bob got sick and had to lie down for a while, so Pete and Jupiter had to do his part of the work. The effort and fear of the past days had taken more out of him than he had admitted.

By the time the last load was finally completed and Aunt Mathilda had compensated all the helpers with a fantastic barbecue, it was already dark. It was not a very talkative group sitting around the barbecue. Everyone was tired. It had been a hard drudgery in the scorching heat.

Nonetheless, something good had come out of the day. Jim had apparently realized that The Three Investigators were 'good for something' after all, and had not said an unkind word all day. After dinner, he even agreed to take Bob and Pete home. They climbed into the pick-up truck and it rumbled off the yard. The other helpers also said goodbye.

Jupiter helped his aunt and uncle carry the dirty dishes into the kitchen. Then he stood under the shower with his eyes closed for a while and then hopped into bed.

14. Who is the Princess?

On Friday afternoon, Bob stuck his head out of Tunnel Two in the trailer, looked around, noticed that his audience was completely assembled, and announced: "Suicide!"

Jupiter was sitting at the computer printing out new business cards. Pete, who was putting the newly printed business cards into a card index box, flinched. "Excuse me?"

"Suicide," Bob repeated, climbed up and closed the trap door. "The princess was not quite real. She was a gambler and appeared in Cochin in the seventies. Let me by, Pete."

Bob let himself fall into an armchair. "Her name was Anuradha. Family name not known. She was called 'princess' because she claimed to be descended from the former maharajas of Kerala, but she never proved it. However, as she was as beautiful as she was rich, she was treated like a real princess.

"For a few years, she was a very well-known figure in Cochin. But then she disappeared one day. There was a rumour that she had gambled away her money and jewellery in a single night and then committed suicide. Her body was never found. And since I know you are going to ask about it right away, I could not find any connection between her and the sapphire. But there is a strange coincidence. The name 'Anuradha' means 'a bright star'—so she herself was the 'Star of Kerala' for a while."

"Interesting," said Jupiter, "but hardly of ground-breaking importance. After all, we are looking for the stone, not the lady."

"Then why did Mr Shreber leave us the photo?" Pete pulled a folder from the shelf and took the Cochin photo out. "Who owned the stone, if it wasn't one of these gamblers? We can't fly to India and look for a sapphire that disappeared who knows how many years ago!"

"There is something else," Bob said. "'Anuradha' was one of the names the fake nurse on the yacht asked me about. So this princess definitely had something to do with it."

They looked at the photo again, but it told them nothing. Three men, one woman, at a table playing cards. There was nothing more.

"It's no use," Jupiter finally had to admit. "This lead doesn't help us at the moment. So let us deal with the *USS Leviathan* and Nathan Holbrook. All I could find out about the *Leviathan* was that it is anchored in San Diego."

"Great," said Pete. "What are we waiting for? We just go there, get on board, get the stone and then... do the right thing—which we still don't know what it is. This Mr Shreber either had an incredibly high opinion of us—or he couldn't stand us!"

"I agree with you now," Bob said. "By the way, how are you going to find a rather small sapphire hidden somewhere on an aircraft carrier that you can't even get to as it belongs to the Navy?"

"We'll ask this Mr Holbrook for help," said Jupiter. "He was on the ship, probably knew John Fisher and may know where the stone is hidden. He lives halfway between San Diego and Tucson in a tiny desert town called Salome. And I've already phoned him and left him a message on his answering machine that we are coming." He looked at his watch. "But since the journey is quite long and I value comfort, I've called Worthington to give us a lift. He should be here any minute."

At that moment, Jim shouted from outside: "Hey! You three boys! Where are you?"

Bob stood up, pulled down 'See-All' and looked into it. "Yes, there's Worthington now," Bob announced, "and Jim is standing there staring at the car."

The Three Investigators crawled out of the Cold Gate and ran across the yard.

It was always an impressive sight when the black Rolls-Royce with the flashing gold-plated trimmings rolled into The Jones Salvage Yard.

The new helper was still staring at the distinguished vehicle. "Say, did I miss something here?" he asked. "Am I employed by millionaires? And I'm working for a lousy fifteen dollars an hour?"

"The Rolls-Royce has nothing to do with the salvage yard," replied Jupiter, who of course immediately took the opportunity to repay Jim's arrogance with the same coin. "It was provided to us by a former client who was satisfied with our investigation work."

Then Jupe turned to the chauffeur. "Hello, Worthington, how are you?"

Worthington had got out. He nodded at Jim with imitable British courtesy and held the door open for The Three Investigators. As he knew Jupiter, Pete and Bob very well, he immediately caught the tension between them and the new helper—and played along.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," the chauffeur said stiffly, as if he had never exchanged a private word with them before. "I hope that I can carry out my service to your satisfaction."

"I am sure of it, Worthington," Jupiter said just as stiffly.

The boys got in, Worthington closed the door, sat back behind the wheel and let the magnificent Rolls-Royce roll off the yard. When The Three Investigators turned around, Jim was still standing there, staring at them, and they couldn't control themselves and were almost bursting with laughter.

"That was great, Worthington!" Pete praised.

Worthington smiled. "May I ask who that—uh—gentleman is? When I drove in, he told me to get lost, because this is Rocky Beach and not Beverly Hills. An extremely rude person."

"That is Jim Cooper," said Jupiter. "Since Hans and Konrad returned to Germany, my uncle has tried to run the business on his own. With our help, it's always worked quite well, but when we are at school or on the road, he just needs more support. So he hired Jim on a trial basis for four weeks."

"And the four weeks will hopefully be over soon," Bob said. "We haven't told you this yet, Jupe—when Jim brought us home last night, he asked us about our investigation work. We didn't tell him anything, of course—only that he could find some reports about us in the newspapers. That's when he stopped asking more."

"You can't blame him for being curious," Jupiter said wisely and fished a bottle of soda out of the car's fridge. "At first, he didn't even want to believe that we were real investigators. It is an improvement if he now wants to find out about us."

"That's right," said Pete, "but he was much more interested in our current case than in us. Doesn't that strike you as strange?"

The First Investigator frowned. "Granted, it's a little strange. But if you mean to imply that Jim might have something to do with Rashura, I think it's too far-fetched."

"If you think it doesn't mean anything, it's fine by me," Pete said. "We really don't need any more suspects in this case."

"Speaking of suspects," Worthington calmly interjected. "I may be wrong, but it looks like someone is following us—a black Dodge, as far as I can tell."

The Three Investigators turned around and looked through the rear window. They were on the coastal road to Santa Monica, which was not as busy as usual here, and immediately

spotted the car. The driver made no effort to remain hidden and always kept the same distance of about sixty metres.

“Maybe it’s a coincidence,” Bob said. “He can turn off and disappear at any time. Maybe it’s not Rashura at all.”

“He has already ignored three opportunities to overtake,” Worthington said.

“Can we lose him?” Jupiter asked.

The chauffeur shook his head. “I am sorry. He can drive as fast as we can, and the coastal road leads directly to San Diego. If we leave it, we’ll be stuck in the Los Angeles traffic for hours.”

So they drove on. Worthington kept his eyes on the rear-view mirror and the boys kept turning around. The black car stayed behind them as persistently as their own shadow.

“I don’t understand this,” Pete said. “If that is Rashura, what else do they want from us? I thought they should go for Ishmael now!”

“Maybe they haven’t found him yet.” Bob slipped on the seat uncomfortably. “Or maybe they found him and...” He fell silent, but they all thought of the same thing.

Until now, the gang with the evil demon name had not exactly distinguished itself by being friendly to their opponents... or victims. And next time, they might issue something stronger than sedatives or refuse to give the antidote.

“Gentlemen,” Worthington said, “I don’t like that black Dodge at all and I have a suggestion.”

“What is it, Worthington?” Jupe said.

“I am responsible to my employer for the safety of the Rolls-Royce... and your parents and guardians for your safety,” the chauffeur continued. “I suggest that we change over to my private car. Then I can drive a little bolder, so that I can lose that Dodge if necessary.”

“Sure,” Jupe agreed. “That’s a good idea.”

“Unfortunately, the only thing is that I don’t have a fridge in my car...” Worthington said.

“Not to worry about that!” Pete quipped.

Worthington turned off the coastal road and drove into the city. The Three Investigators knew that Worthington lived on Wilshire Boulevard. Two blocks away, he let them get out—this time without holding the door open for them—and drove on. Jupiter, Pete and Bob ducked behind some big bins. After a few seconds, they saw the Dodge drive past them, but they couldn’t see who was at the wheel as the side windows were darkened.

“It could be the car from the Beach Café,” said Jupiter, “but I’m not quite sure. The high beam was too bright and blinded me then.”

After five minutes, Worthington, in his own car, stopped next to The Three Investigators and they quickly got in.

“I drove the Rolls-Royce into the underground car park,” the chauffeur said. “I don’t think our pursuer saw me do it. When I came out in my car, he was nowhere to be seen.”

“Excellent, Worthington.” Jupiter peeked back. “I think it worked.”

Worthington drove back to the coastal road. The black Dodge remained unseen.

15. Nathan

About two hours later, Worthington stopped his car just outside a small house in a lonely side street of Salome. The house seemed to doze in the late afternoon heat. Most of the shutters were closed.

Bob threw a doubtful glance at the First Investigator. "Are you sure he's expecting us?"

"Not directly," Jupiter confessed. "But I hope that by now he is home and checked his answering machine."

"Maybe he went shopping," said Pete.

"I could do that as well," said Worthington. "The car's running low on fuel and have to it fill up immediately."

"Good idea, Worthington," Jupiter said. "Better to fill up now in case we need the car for a chase!"

The chauffeur laughed and added: "I could take this opportunity to buy some drinks for the return trip."

"You go on ahead. We'll be fine here," Jupe continued. "Anyway, we'll call you on your mobile phone if we need you to come back sooner."

The boys got out of the car. After the pleasant air-conditioned coolness in Worthington's car, the hot, dusty desert air hit them like a blow. The heat shimmered across the road and even the cacti and palm trees at the side of the road looked as if they could use a good sip of water.

Worthington left and The Three Investigators walked up the path to the house. Along the way, they saw tyre tracks on the sand that covered the large yard, but no car was visible.

They climbed up the steps to the front door and Jupiter rang the bell. A few seconds later, the door opened—and in front of them stood a man with a gun in his hand.

"Well, well, at last," he said graciously, "here are our hostages." It was Taylor.

The Three Investigators were petrified. Taylor took a step aside and waved them into the hallway. "Come on, get in! And no tricks!"

Taylor directed The Three Investigators into a small living room. There sat a rather dishevelled and exhausted looking man tied to a kitchen chair with a clothesline.

Pete was shocked and blurted out: "Ishmael!" It immediately became clear that this had been a mistake. Ishmael's grim face became even darker and he pressed his lips tightly together.

At that moment, a grey-haired man and a tall blonde woman came into the living room. Both of them grinned openly.

"Thanks a lot, boy," said the man. He was in his mid-forties, tall and slim, and wore a tailor-made suit. By his voice, Pete and Jupiter recognized him as the driver of the black car at the Beach Café; and Bob recognized him as well—he was the 'boss' from the Orient Import warehouse. As for the woman, The Three Investigators had immediately recognized her as the fake nurse who had given Mr Mason the sedative.

"You see, Mr Holbrook, your persistent denial has done you no good now," the man said. "We knew you were Ishmael, and our young friend here has just confirmed it. You could have saved yourself two unpleasant days if you had just admitted it immediately."

“Damn you lot!” Ishmael said angrily.

“Anyway, back to you guys,” the man continued as he sat down on an armchair. “How did you come here?”

“We took a taxi,” Jupe lied.

“By taxi. Really? How are you going home then?”

“We’ll figure it out when we need to,” Jupe replied.

“Anyway, you’re not going home so fast. Just don’t do anything stupid because I hate bloodstains on the carpet. Angelica, please check if we have enough clotheslines to tie our new hostages. And take all their mobile phones, if they have any.”

The woman went outside. After a short time, she came back and began expertly tying up the boys’ wrists behind their backs.

When she tied Bob, he involuntarily flinched from her. “I bet you are the woman on the yacht! You’re the one who poisoned me!”

She smiled at him. “But I also sent you the antidote. I would have been very sad if you hadn’t got it in time.” Her voice was soft and pleasant like velvet.

When everyone was tied up, the boss said: “So, now that we are all together, perhaps Mr Holbrook is finally ready to work with us. I have explained in detail what will happen if you continue to refuse to answer my questions. And since you know all my questions, I do not need to repeat them.” He leaned back comfortably. “Please, I’m listening.”

“Just a moment,” Jupiter interjected. “May I ask something first?” He didn’t even wait for permission. “How did you know to come here?”

“Yeah, guess what, you’re not the only smart guys in California. We found out that our esteemed Mr Holbrook here was a friend of Harry Shreber. Harry’s friends are our friends too—and so, of course, we drove straight here to visit him.”

His voice dripped with irony, but Jupiter didn’t pay attention. “Then how did you know we were coming here as well?” he asked.

“Silly boy. Remember? You left Mr Holbrook a voice message that you are coming!” the man smirked. “Anyway, it’s a shame after all your efforts to make it this far. So now that we’ve got that cleared up—”

“Wait! You haven’t cleared up everything yet!” Jupiter exclaimed.

“No,” the boss agreed. “And I would like to point out that it is not my primary goal to explain anything to you brats. I have an assignment I intend to carry out and I have already wasted two days here with Mr Holbrook’s stubbornness. So now kindly shut up and let me do my job. Mr Holbrook, if you please—”

“Assignment?” Jupiter asked, as if he hadn’t heard the order to shut up at all. “Then you are not Rashura at all?”

The boss looked at Jupe silently for a moment. Then he said: “Angelica...”

She nodded and went outside again. After a short time, she came back with a piece of cloth with which she gagged Jupiter professionally despite his surprised resistance. Then she sat down on an armchair.

“There,” said the grey-haired man. “Now perhaps I can finally continue in peace.” He turned abruptly to Pete and Bob. “Or perhaps you two would like to ask something as well?”

They shook their heads hastily while Jupiter pierced the boss with an angry look.

However, the boss looked at Jupe calmly. “I will answer your question anyway. No, I am not Rashura. Does that surprise you? I’m flattered, but that doesn’t change the facts. You can call me ‘Smith’—that means you can’t, of course, because you’re gagged and can only grunt, but you’re allowed to think.”

“But who—” Pete began and immediately fell silent when Mr Smith looked at him.

“Who is Rashura? That need not interest you because after today, we will disappear from your lives... or you from ours, which will be more unpleasant for you than for us.”

The boss then turned to Ishmael and his voice changed. Every trace of kindness disappeared and he struck with his words like a whip. “Holbrook, if you do not answer my question within five seconds, I will kill one of these boys. Where is the stone?”

Ishmael gave The Three Investigators a short, hard look as if he was really considering whether he should risk remaining silent. They stared at him in fear. What would he do? After all, they still didn’t know what he was up to. But then Ishmael turned back to Smith and nodded briefly. “Leave the boys alone. The stone is in a storeroom on board the *USS Leviathan*.”

“*Leviathan*?” Smith repeated, and an ugly smile spread across his angular face. “Hence the silly little game with Ishmael? And who was Harry Shreber—Ahab himself? Never mind. Where is the ship?”

“Naval Base San Diego,” Ishmael mumbled.

“How do you get in?”

“As a civilian, you can’t.”

“But you’re not a civilian, right? You’re now with the Navy Reserves, right?”

Ishmael seemed to have come to terms with his fate. “Yes, but you don’t need to enter the naval base at all. The *Leviathan* leaves tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah?” Smith raised an eyebrow. “And you think we’re stupid enough to mess with a whole shipload of Navy guys?”

“That is not necessary either,” Ishmael said. “The ship is out of service. There will only be a minimal crew on board.”

Smith pondered briefly, nodded and stood up. “Good. Angelica, lock the boys in the basement. Holbrook, you will come with us and get the stone from the ship.”

Smith then looked at The Three Investigators and shook his head. “I can’t believe the trouble three teenage boys can cause me. I really hope I’ll never see you three pests—” he laughed gloatingly at his remark, “—again.”

“We are investigators,” Bob said in a headstrong manner. “Since you are so set on a criminal career, remember that you have to live with the possibility of getting caught.”

Smith and Taylor stared at Bob in disbelief and then burst out laughing. When Smith had calmed down again, he grinned. “That was really good. Thank you for the advice. Now, get these rascals out of my sight!”

Angelica, now also holding a gun, drove The Three Investigators out into the hallway and then down the basement stairs. Halfway down, she came a little too close to Bob who suddenly resisted—but she drilled the gun into his back and said: “Forget it. I can handle this thing just as well as I can handle a lethal injection. Just go down quietly and nothing will happen to you.”

Bob acquiesced, but said imploringly: “Listen, you still have a chance to get out of this in one piece. If you—”

“Move along, boy,” she ordered coldly, “or I’ll pull the trigger.”

“Forget it, Bob,” Pete said. “It’s no use.”

“Smart boy,” Angelica sneered. “Go in there on the left.”

The basement room on the left side of the corridor had apparently been used as a prison for Ishmael in the past two days. To the left and right side of the door frame were metal brackets and on the floor was a thick board, which was probably placed in the brackets as a barricade to prevent the door from opening.

Angelica waited until her three prisoners had entered the room, and then she turned on the light. The room had two small, tightly barred windows for protection against rats, but strong enough to stop people. A few blankets had been thrown together on the floor to form a poor bed, and next to it stood an empty water bottle. Five large moving boxes were piled up against the wall. They were sealed with adhesive tape. Apparently Ishmael kept nothing in them that could have helped him during his imprisonment.

Angelica quickly closed the door and turned the key. A heavy blow with which the board was wedged made the door shake. Then the prisoners heard her going up the stairs. Shortly afterwards, a car drove up. Four doors were slammed shut, the engine started, the sound dissipated and died.

Jupiter, who was still gagged, mumbled something. Bob understood and he used his mouth to pull Jupe's gag down.

With his bound hands behind his back, Jupe went to the door, clamped his wrist behind the handle and tried to jiggle it, but the door didn't move a millimetre—something which he had expected.

“Well,” said Pete, “that was another success all down the line. Now what?”

16. Arizona by Night

“First we should get rid of our shackles,” said Jupiter. Since they could move and help each other, it was no problem. Then Jupiter looked around the basement room, inspected the two windows and marched to the five boxes.

“We don’t have our mobile phones now, and we cannot just sit here and wait for Worthington to come back,” Jupe said. “Instead, we have to get out of here as quickly as possible. Give me a hand—maybe we can find something in here that we can use.”

The three of them tore the boxes apart. In the first, they found a collection of porcelain plates, in the second and third boxes were books. In the fourth was a pile of old files and in the fifth a few old clothes.

“Couldn’t we twist some clothes together to form a rope and tear out the grille with it?” Bob suggested.

“Let’s try it,” Jupe agreed. “I hate to say it, but I believe Mr Holbrook is in danger. The criminals cannot afford to release a witness.”

“And it’s my fault,” Pete said bitterly, “if I hadn’t called him ‘Ishmael’—”

“There is no point in reproaching yourself,” said Jupiter. “The rope is a good idea, Bob.”

They tore old shirts into strips and twisted it into a rope, which they knotted to the grille. Then they grabbed it and pulled it with all their might. The grille crunched, loosened, wobbled—and broke out of the wall so suddenly that they all fell over each other. They picked themselves up and rushed to the window. It was now dark outside and they couldn’t see what was there.

“I can’t get through,” Jupiter said soberly. “Pete, what about you?”

“Shoulders too broad. Bob could do it.”

“I’ll try,” Bob said determinedly. “Give me a lift.”

Jupiter and Pete lifted him up. Bob put his head and one arm through the window opening and felt for a hold. “It goes outside, into the yard. If Worthington comes back now, I would be able to see his car. Other than that, there are just cobblestones everywhere, but I can’t hold on to them. It’s no use, you’ll have to push me up further!” But after a few seconds, he cried out. “Ow! I can’t—I’m stuck! Let me down!”

They pulled him back and put him down. Jupiter pinched his lower lip, then he nodded. “We have to open the door. Bob, could you break out one of the cobblestones?”

“Not without tools.”

“We have tools.” Jupiter took one of the porcelain plates from the box and smashed it on the stone floor. He came back with the biggest piece. “Use it to scrape the sand out of the joints.”

“If you think so... but it will take time. How long can you carry me?”

“That is not necessary. We’ll just slide the boxes of books under the window and you can stand on them.”

So Bob climbed on the boxes, stretched his arm out and started to scrape out the sand around one of the cobblestones. Shortly afterwards he managed to pry the stone out. He grabbed it and jumped down from the box. “And now what?”

“Now let’s knock the lock off the door.”

“They’re probably long gone now,” Bob said gloomily.

“But certainly not on the ship yet,” Jupe said.

Jupiter went to the door, pressed against it around the lock and nodded. “Here—this is where you have to strike.”

“I’d like to do that,” Pete said. “I’m not really a fan of breaking things like that, but in this case I’ll make an exception. Of course, we should compensate Mr Holbrook for the damage later.”

Pete went to the door, swung out and smashed the cobblestone right into the spot marked by Jupiter. There was a crack in the wood around the lock. Pete struck again. Chips flew in all directions and the lock mechanism was exposed. They levered it out and now the door could be opened a gap before it was blocked by the thick board. The gap was too narrow for one hand, but they pushed the broken window grille through it and with some effort, lifted the board until it came out of the bracket and fell to the floor with a crash. The door opened and they were free.

Suddenly, Bob heard a noise outside. He climbed back up to the window and took a look outside. “Worthington’s back,” Bob said. “Just about right!”

They ran up the stairs and into the yard, met the chauffeur, and briefly told him what had happened.

“We have to get out of here quick,” cried Pete.

“Wait a minute,” Jupe said. “Since we are here, we might as well search Ishmael’s house to see what other clues we can get. Besides the criminals, he seems to know what is going on.”

“Then, we’d better be quick if we do not want to lose more time,” Bob said.

While Worthington stood watch at the main door, The Three Investigators went back inside the house and searched from room to room. There was nothing much except in the study. The telephone there was of no use because the cable had been cut, and the computer was dead too. Anyway, if they need to call someone, they could use Worthington’s mobile phone.

Very quickly, Jupiter checked the drawers while Pete searched the bookcases.

“Here’s something...” Bob interrupted. He had leafed through some newspaper clippings on Ishmael’s desk and was now holding one of them in his hand. He looked even paler than before. “I think we have a real problem. Look at this...”

They gathered around him and Bob read out the newspaper article:

USS Leviathan to be the Largest Artificial Reef off the Coast of California

Next Saturday, the USS Leviathan, one of the largest aircraft carriers in the US Navy, will be put to peaceful use after countless military missions. Ten kilometres off San Diego, it will become an artificial reef at a depth of 45 metres, serving as a new home for fish and corals. Like the USS Yancey, the USS Oriskany and other decommissioned battleships before her, she has been gutted and fitted with explosive charges.

On Saturday, four tugs will tow her from the naval base to her final resting place and sink her there. With a total length of 210 metres, this will be the largest artificial reef off the Californian coast. The spectacle can be followed by Navy personnel, former crew members and other interested parties on spectator ships. Tickets for this event can be obtained from the Navy headquarters in San Diego...

“But...” Pete swallowed, “if Ishmael knew that—”

“We have lost many days,” mumbled Jupiter. “Maybe he had originally thought that we could still make it... but now—”

“Maybe he still thinks so now,” Bob said hoarsely. “As a member of the Navy Reserves, maybe he can get on the ship in time before it is towed out of the naval base.”

“On a ship full of explosives?” Jupiter shook his head. “Out of the question. They won’t let anyone else on it... and remember that Ishmael said that they don’t need to enter the naval base at all as the ship leaves tomorrow. This could mean that they could follow the ship at sea.”

“But if they actually get on board, they’ll all blow up!” cried Bob. “All for a stupid precious stone that nobody needs!”

It was very quiet for a while until Jupiter said: “I’m not quite sure if that’s the real motive, but basically you’re right. And I think that Ishmael knew that very well when he lured them away from here.”

“What are we going to do now?” Pete asked. “Can we call someone? We could use Worthington’s mobile phone.”

“Maybe we should go straight to the nearest police station, explain the situation to them face to face and have them call the naval base directly,” Jupiter suggested.

The three of them quickly got back into Worthington’s car and he drove to Salome. The road was dark, dusty and deserted.

Five minutes later, they saw the lighted sign of a post office on the empty main street. More lights were shining about a hundred metres away. As The Three Investigators did not want to waste any more time, they got out of the car and ran to a lighted building next to the post office—which was a pub. The three of them barged in.

After Worthington had parked and got out of his car, he saw the three boys coming back out with a weighty sheriff. “Now, the three of you come with me,” the sheriff said. “Disturbing the peace at night, making a nuisance of yourselves—”

The sheriff interrupted himself when he saw the chauffeur approaching. “What is this? Is he with you?” Then he stared at Worthington with a mixture of suspicion and disbelief.

“Yes, I am with these three gentlemen,” Worthington replied. “I’m a chauffeur and I’m aware that my work clothes look unsuitable here, but they’re really not that unusual. Moreover, that is not important. I suggest you listen to what these young gentlemen have to say to you.”

“These young gentlemen just told me a bunch of hogwash,” said the sheriff. “May I ask for your names—”

“Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw, Bob Andrews,” Jupiter shot in between. “We are investigators and here is our card.”

The sheriff took the card and looked at it briefly. “Come with me—all of you,” he said.

In provocative slowness, he led them fifty metres further to a small building where a police car was parked at the side. He unlocked the door to the building and let the four of them in.

“Now tell me again what is this all about,” the sheriff said, as he looked at the business card carefully.

Patiently, Jupiter began describing the events to the sheriff. He was careful to just give the pertinent points—enough for the sheriff to contact the Navy to warn them of possible intruders on the *Leviathan*. “Therefore we need your assistance to contact Naval Base San Diego—” He was about to finish but was interrupted.

“No can do,” the sheriff objected. “I can’t just contact the Navy like that. I don’t even know who you are. This card doesn’t mean anything. You might just be pranksters that can

get me into a whole lot of trouble with the Navy.”

“Okay, how about you call Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department and he can tell you who we are,” Jupe suggested. “Perhaps we can also speak to him then.”

“Rocky Beach, huh?” The sheriff mumbled. To save time, Jupiter told him the phone number of the Rocky Beach Police Department.

The sheriff held the phone to his ear, dialled the number and waited while he scowled at The Three Investigators and Worthington. Then he said: “This is Hancock from Salome Police Station in Arizona. Inspector Cotta please. Yes, I’ll hold... What? Don’t you have something to do over there? ... Ha ha, very funny... What? No, I’ve got three suspicious kids from your area who—what? Yeah, right... Jupiter Jones, Pete Cren—oh, you know them, that’s great... How am I supposed to know what they’re doing here?” He took the handset off his ear and held it out to Jupiter. “You explain to him.”

Jupiter picked up the phone and immediately said: “Hello Inspector, this is Jupiter Jones. In San Diego tomorrow, the aircraft carrier *USS Leviathan* will be towed out of the naval base to be sunk. It is imperative that you prevent the explosives from being detonated as there are people aboard that ship!”

“I’m sorry,” came the reply. “The entire Rocky Beach police force is busy looking for a runaway cat—or was it a lost parrot—and therefore cannot deal with the incredibly exciting cases of The Three Investigators. Tell your tales somewhere else, Jupiter Jones.”

Jupiter moaned. “Inspector Kershaw?”

“Quite right,” said the inspector, with whom they had had trouble with on several occasions. “Today, I’m covering Cotta’s duties here and I have better things to do than to listen to your nonsense in the middle of the night. You’re probably just stuck in the desert with a flat tyre and want to be brought home at the government’s expense—but you miscalculated. See how you get along on your own!”

“No!” cried Jupiter. “You must believe me! Sure, you don’t care what happens to us, but call the Navy in San Diego and prevent—”

It clicked. Kershaw, who did not like The Three Investigators any more than they liked him, had hung up.

Jupiter turned to Sheriff Hancock. “Inspector Kershaw doesn’t believe us—”

“Well,” said Hancock stretched out, “neither do I.”

“But we are telling the truth! Call the Navy now!” Jupiter insisted.

“Sheriff,” Bob interfered. “We are really telling the truth. Send your people to Mr Holbrook’s house and check it out! The basement door is broken as the criminals locked us in there—”

But unfortunately he had probably said something wrong. Hancock’s face darkened. “My people, huh? Take a good look around this absolutely empty room, you clown—I don’t have any people here! I’m responsible for a hundred and twenty people in this town, and that’s just me. The last thing I’m going to do now is to go to Holbrook’s house! Tomorrow I’ll have a look at it, and you three boy scouts and your chauffeur can stay where I can keep an eye on you all tonight!”

And despite all the protests, five minutes later, they were sitting in the only barred cell in the Salome Police Station. Sheriff Hancock ignored all requests and complaints.

“Now, you kids stay in there quietly while I go back and finish my drink,” Hancock said. “I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

After the sheriff left, Jupe said: “By the way, Worthington, do you have your mobile phone with you?”

“Sorry, Jupiter,” the chauffeur replied. “I left it in the car.”

“It’s okay,” Jupe said. “Anyway, the only person who could help us is Inspector Cotta—and who knows where he is now.”

Suddenly, the phone at the sheriff’s desk rang, but there was nobody to pick it up. It stopped and then rang again two more times.

17. Unexpected Help

Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

This was the only noise for over an hour. Minute by minute, the hand of the large wall clock advanced agonizingly slowly and yet far too quickly.

Sheriff Hancock finally returned from the pub. Jupiter again explained to him what it was all about; Worthington demanded to be allowed to call his employer Mr Gelbert of the Rent-’n-Ride Auto Agency; Bob gave all the details about the white yacht he remembered; and Pete threw a tantrum—all for nothing. Hancock was again deaf to all explanations, pleas and threats. At last, the four of them gave up, sat down on the cold floor in the cell, and stared in bitter and impotent rage at the stubborn sheriff. That did not impress him either.

The sheriff then made himself a cup of coffee, sat down at a dusty old computer and started typing so doggedly as if he had to stamp an enemy into the ground with every keystroke. After a short while, he dozed off on his armchair.

It was now four o’clock in the morning. They were dead tired, but too agitated to sleep. With every minute, the criminals and Ishmael approached the *Leviathan*; and with every minute, the chance of stopping them somehow diminished.

Twenty minutes later, they heard a car pull up. A door slammed shut and immediately afterwards, there was a knock on the door. Hancock, who was snoring away, jumped up from his chair.

“What the dickens? Who is it at this early hour?” He got up, straightened his gun belt, went to the door and opened it. “Yeah? What’s going on? Who are you?”

The Three Investigators could not hear the visitor’s answer, only the sheriff’s voice. “So? What do you want? … Seen?” cried Sheriff Hancock with a snorting laugh. “I should say so. Them brats has got the whole neighbourhood in an uproar and now they’re sitting in my jail cell where they belong!”

The Three Investigators suddenly sat upright. Somebody knew they were here.

Moments later, they heard two sets of footsteps coming towards their cell. The sheriff appeared and close behind him was...

“Sergeant Madhu!” Bob exclaimed and all the three boys looked at the visitor in disbelief.

It was indeed the lean Indian policeman who raised his eyebrows when he saw The Three Investigators and Worthington in the cell.

“Indeed… What have they done?” Madhu asked.

“Nothing!” Bob pulled himself together. “Sergeant Madhu, you gotta help us! You gotta call the Navy in San Diego!”

“Quiet!” yelled Hancock. “Sergeant, if you wanna do me a favour, take the whole bunch of them and throw them into the sea! This has been going on for hours—like a broken record! For goodness’ sake, get them out of my sight.”

“Certainly, if you insist,” said Madhu politely.

“Before that, I need to see some identification,” Sheriff Hancock said.

“Of course.” Madhu pulled a police ID out of his pocket. Hancock checked it and prepared a document for Madhu to sign. Then the sheriff unlocked the cell door and The Three Investigators and Worthington stumbled out.

Madhu looked at them. “What happened?”

They hesitated. Bob had now also remembered that Madhu could be on the wrong side. If they explained everything to him now and he warned Smith, Taylor and Angelica in time, what would happen to Ishmael?

Madhu waited, but when they were silent, he shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. Let’s go.”

“The sooner the better,” growled Hancock.

They left the police station and stepped out into the night. A cold wind blew in from the desert. The sky was starry and black—very different from Rocky Beach, where the distant lights of Los Angeles outshone everything else. The Three Investigators shivered and they were tired and disillusioned.

But when they saw the black Dodge parked by the side of the building, they were suddenly wide awake again.

“It was you!” Pete cried and stared at Madhu. “You were following us! But we thought we had lost you! How did you find us?”

“It wasn’t that easy,” Madhu admitted. “After I lost your trail, I had to make a lot of phone calls and ask around. Finally, I contacted Rocky Beach Police Department and spoke to an Inspector Kershaw.”

“I don’t believe it!” said Jupiter. “At least we got something good out of that Kershaw!”

“I called this place several times, but no one picked up the phone,” Madhu continued, “so I had to take a chance and come here directly.”

“And before we continue, I’d like to know who you are. What do you know about Rashura and the stone? And whose side are you on, Sergeant Madhu?” Jupe insisted.

Madhu sighed. “Couldn’t you have asked me that a few days ago instead of spying on me and then running away when I asked you to stop? We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble.” He paused and then continued: “I work for the Indian government. I’m trying to solve a forty-year-old case, and the trail led me here. After you exposed me in front of Inspector Havilland, I explained everything to him. Right now, I think you better go back to Rocky Beach.”

“No!” Bob said immediately. “We have to go to San Diego! We have to stop the explosion!”

“Gentlemen, I definitely have to go back to Rocky Beach,” Worthington interjected. “The Rolls-Royce is needed at ten o’clock. Do you agree with that? I hate to leave you alone, but you’ll be in good hands with a policeman.”

“Yes,” Jupiter said quickly. “Please inform Inspector Cotta of everything. He should send us help if it is possible. Thank you, Worthington—and I’m sorry about all this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Worthington said. “Take care of yourself.”

They nodded and looked at Worthington as he walked to his car. Then they turned to Sergeant Madhu.

“Okay, get in,” the sergeant said. “We’ll talk about it on the way to San Diego.”

“In this forty-year-old case,” Bob began, as they sat in the car and drove west through the night, “is it about the Star of Kerala? What does the Indian government have to do with a jewel theft?”

“Quite a lot indeed,” said Madhu. “The stone was part of a maharaja’s treasure...”

“... And it was stolen together with some other jewels,” added Jupiter. “Some of them reappeared, but the Star of Kerala remained missing.”

“Yes, that’s what it says on record.” Madhu sounded slightly amused. “However, what is not on record is the fact that not only a few jewels were stolen at that time, but almost the entire treasure—gemstones, jewellery, gold. When the theft was noticed, the treasury was already almost empty. The value was in the millions then. Today, it can hardly be estimated. The maharaja lost not only his fortune but also his power because he could no longer pay his guards, soldiers and servants. With his remaining fortune, he retreated to a much more modest palace and died a few years later.”

The Three Investigators listened in awe. “And did they find the thieves?” Pete asked.

“No, but it was suspected that someone who knew the palace inside out must have been involved in the theft. Of course, everyone was questioned, their houses searched, but nothing was found.”

“What about the lady known as Anuradha?” Jupiter asked.

“At that time, she was a government agent who worked in the palace as an aide to the maharani—that’s the wife of a maharaja. Yes, she was questioned as well but whatever possessions she had, she could prove that she had inherited them from her late husband. After that, there was no more trace of the treasure... until one night in Cochin—”

“—In which Anuradha lost the Star of Kerala as a stake in poker,” Jupiter surmised.

“Not quite,” replied Madhu. “The stone was lost as a stake, that’s true. There were witnesses around who could testify to that. However, Anuradha did not lose it—she was the one who won it.”

Stunned, The Three Investigators stared at him. “And who had lost it to her then?” Pete asked curiously.

“An American pilot named John Fisher.”

“So he stole the maharaja’s treasure?” Pete asked.

“We suspect that he was involved. In any case, he had somehow got hold of the sapphire. After that poker game, the sapphire was never seen again. Anuradha, however, had vanished without a trace and never reappeared.”

They remained silent in horror. “Do you think he killed her to get the stone back?” Bob finally asked.

Madhu accelerated to overtake a truck. “There was no evidence for that,” he replied when the manoeuvre was over. “In any case, it didn’t bring him luck. Some time after his return to the US, he had an accident and died. There was no hint of what happened to the stone for a long time... until Harry Shreber started his strange little game and gave you his riddle.”

“I told you he didn’t like us,” grumbled Pete.

Jupiter remained remarkably quiet for a while. Finally he asked: “What do you know about Rashura?”

“Only that he is the head of the whole thing,” Madhu replied.

“Do you know who he is?”

“No.”

“How did Taylor know that Mr Sapchevsky had called the Waterside police and how did he prevent a real police car from attending to the call?”

There was a long break. “I don’t know,” Madhu finally said.

“Didn’t you talk to Taylor?”

“Pardon? ... No.”

“And gave him all the information he needed?”

“Have you lost your mind? No!”

“I have not lost my mind at all, sir,” said Jupiter. “I am merely trying to clear up the inconsistencies.”

“By suspecting me?”

“I like to rely on facts, sir. And your actions in this case give me every reason to doubt you.”

“You said that beautifully, but you’re still on the wrong track,” Madhu said and sounded relaxed again. “If I were on Rashura’s side, I certainly wouldn’t have got you out of your cell.”

“But... how about if you had lost track of your allies and are now trying to find them again with our help,” Jupiter suggested.

Madhu laughed briefly. “Yes, you are right, of course. Here you go, keep on suspecting me.”

For a while, they drove silently through the night. Outside it was still dark. Every now and then, a huge truck came towards them and pulled a long dust plume behind it. In Quartzsite, Madhu turned left and now the road went straight south for a seemingly endless stretch.

Pete and Bob had racked their brains as to what to say. After the initial mistrust, they had decided that Sergeant Madhu was one of the good guys, but Jupiter’s factual reasoning had unsettled them again. Every word could now be wrong, so they remained silent.

Pete looked out of the window and watched as the darkness gradually divided into dark land and a brightening sky. A short time later, the stars faded, the sky turned golden, faint mist lay in the hollows and soon dissipated.

The night was over.

18. Flaming Waters

Around eight, they finally arrived in San Diego. On the way, Sergeant Madhu had stopped once and bought breakfast, which they had wolfed down in the car. There were further delays in the city. Every traffic light showed red, masses of cars pushed their way through the streets, and traffic jams kept occurring.

Madhu had tried to call the Navy three times, but he couldn't get through. When they were stuck in a traffic jam again, he tried again. The Three Investigators watched him intently and winced when he suddenly started talking. At last he had reached someone!

"Good morning," he said. "My name is Sergeant Kamil Madhu from the Waterside Police Department near Los Angeles. I understand you are planning to sink the *USS Leviathan* today. Is that correct? ... Ah... Can you put me through to the person in charge? Thank you." He waited.

The line of cars started to move and he let the Dodge roll slowly. After barely ten metres, he had to stop again. "Good morning, sir. Is there any way to delay the sinking of the *Leviathan*? We have indications that a group of people will try to board the ship and... What? ... No, I'm not trying to play dumb with you, sir. I'm a police officer and... My superior? Inspector Havilland of the... No, I'm stuck in traffic two kilometres away from you and my superior is in... No, I'm not with a terrorist splinter group! ... I'm not saying that you cannot blow up the ship, but only after you have arrested those people! If they are not on board yet, they could be following the *Leviathan* with a white yacht that—" He fell silent, listened for a moment and then said: "Are you sure?" Again he listened. Then he took the phone off his ear, looked at it and put it away. "He says there is no one on board and no one is coming aboard. End of story."

"And what do we do now?" Bob asked hoarsely.

"Now we go home and get our beauty sleep. What do you think we're going to do? We keep going and I'm putting my job on the line by trampling on the nerves of a Navy admiral." He suddenly swerved to the right to the hard shoulder and overtook a line of several stationary cars.

A quarter of an hour later, they reached the naval base. Sergeant Madhu parked his car, showed his badge and was let through, but when The Three Investigators tried to follow him, the guard stopped them. "No civilians, please!"

"Sir, they are important witnesses," Madhu said angrily. "Let them through!"

But the guard shook his head. "I have my orders. Young civilians are not allowed."

"But you must let us through!" cried Pete. "Human lives are in danger!"

"Now don't exaggerate," said the guard.

"He is absolutely right," said Madhu sharply. "We need to talk to Admiral Tenner right away. Please let the boys through!"

"No, Sergeant. You are not authorized to give instructions here. I'm sorry."

"All right." Madhu looked at The Three Investigators. "We've got no choice, guys. Wait for me here. I'll do what I can."

"Don't worry about us," said Jupiter. "We'll manage. The main thing is to stop the *Leviathan*!"

Madhu nodded briefly, turned around and walked away quickly.

“Wait a minute.” The guard looked at The Three Investigators with a frown. “Is this about the *Leviathan*? Why didn’t you say you wanted to watch the sinking instead of talking about endangered lives?”

“Because it is true—” Pete began heatedly.

But Jupiter quickly interrupted. “Yes, we would like to have a look at that. Is that possible?”

“Sure.” The man went into his guard house and came back with a map of the city. “About a kilometre northwest of here is the Cruise Ship Terminal. That’s where the rides are organized. If you hurry, you might be able to get on board a spectator ship. But you really have to hurry—the *Leviathan* was towed out of here an hour ago.”

“An hour ago?” They stared at him in horror. “Is there a taxi stand around here somewhere?” Jupiter asked hastily.

“Yes, about a hundred metres from here. Good luck!”

They ran off.

The taxi drivers looked at them suspiciously as they dashed across the busy road in defiance of all traffic rules and rushed towards the waiting taxis. “Hey,” one of them shouted. “Take it easy, guys—”

The Three Investigators did not pay any attention to him. They ran to the front taxi in the queue, ripped open the doors and threw themselves onto the seats. “To the Cruise Ship Terminal!” cried Jupiter to the surprised driver. “Quick!”

“Quick?” said the man. “I know San Diego is great, but—”

“Please, just drive off!” Jupe exclaimed.

With a shrug of his shoulders, he turned the key in the ignition, accelerated and threaded himself into the traffic. They crossed a canal and then rolled through ugly harbour and industrial areas. Beyond the tall buildings, they saw the sea and, in the middle of the bay was Coronado—a tied island connected to the mainland by a thin strip of land.

How fast could four tugs pull a gigantic aircraft carrier? Was the *Leviathan* already out in the open sea?

Soon they reached the first high-rise buildings. The taxi driver drove quite fast, but it was still far too slow and at every red light, The Three Investigators would have loved to jump out of the taxi and ran all the way there. But finally the road made a bend to the left and they saw the car parks and buildings of the Cruise Ship Terminal. The taxi driver steered the taxi into the car park and stopped. “It’s ten dollars.”

“Ten dollars for that?” cried Pete in outrage. The taxi driver just shrugged. Snorting, they dug out their money and paid. Then they got out and ran to the terminal.

There was a big sign there:

*California’s Largest Artificial Reef—the USS Leviathan
Sinking today 11:30 am
Spectator Ship Fiesta
Departure 9:00 am*

“It’s almost nine!” cried Bob. Wildly they looked around and discovered a small ship called the *Fiesta*, whose gangplank had just been pulled in. They ran straight to it.

“Wait! Stop!” Pete yelled.

It lasted a moment, but then the movement of the ship stopped. Two men laid out the gangplank again and The Three Investigators ran on board.

They were immediately intercepted by a steward in white uniform. "Your tickets, please."

"We don't have any yet," Jupiter gasped. "Three, please. And we must see the captain immediately!"

The man raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yeah? And why?"

"It would take too long to explain now. Believe me, it's important!"

"So," said the steward, tearing off three tickets from his pad. "Well, I'll just get thirty dollars from you first."

They gasped for breath.

"But we don't have thirty dollars," Bob said anxiously. "Or do we?"

"We might." Jupiter made a quick hand signal. "What we don't have is time."

Immediately, all three of them began to rummage around in their trouser pockets, collecting a pile of coins and notes one by one, while the *Fiesta* headed towards the sea in a wide arc around Coronado.

"Twenty-one dollars and thirty-six cents," Pete finally said, risking a look back to the Cruise Ship Terminal. It was already far behind them. "It's that taxi driver's fault! We had enough money!"

"Well, what matters now is that you don't have enough money," said the steward. "So two of you can come along and the third can choose to be thrown overboard or chained in the bilge. That's where the water is knee-high and, if you're lucky, you'll get to see rats lurking around."

They stared at him in astonishment.

"Now leave the boys alone," an elderly man, who had been watching The Three Investigators for quite a while, suddenly interferred. "I'll pay for the third ticket."

Surprised, they turned to him. "How nice of you, sir," said Jupiter. "Thank you very much."

The man winked at them. He must have been seventy years old, had snow-white hair and was wearing a uniform with various medals and insignia that identified him as a Navy officer. He seemed to be slightly disabled and leaned on a stick. "Well, if young people are interested in the Navy, you have to support them. Here's your ten dollars, steward."

"All right," the steward said and finally gave them their tickets. "Have a good trip, boys."

"Thank you." Jupiter stuffed the tickets in his pocket. "Can we please speak to the captain now?"

"Out of the question," the steward barked. "The captain has other things to do now than talk to passengers."

"But it is important!" cried Jupiter loudly. Now they had come so far, time was running out and they still hadn't achieved anything! "There are people on board the *Leviathan*!"

All conversations in the surrounding area suddenly fell silent and the passengers—many of them retired members of the Navy—turned to The Three Investigators in disgust.

The steward frowned. "What are you talking about? Are you crazy? The *Leviathan* will be sunk in less than an hour. There is no one left on board! That would be madness!"

"Exactly," Jupiter stressed, still so loud that everyone could listen in. "And that's why we need to see the captain immediately! He must prevent the *Leviathan* from being blown up!"

"Wait a minute," the elderly man who had paid their third ticket mingled with the discussion. "How could you possibly know that?"

“We are investigators,” Jupiter explained, took a business card from his pocket and gave it to him. Then he turned to the steward again. “I assure you, it is no joke. The people aboard the *Leviathan* don’t know that it is to be blown up. They are looking for something and they have no chance of leaving the ship in time unless they are warned immediately—or unless the blasting is stopped.”

The steward looked at him sincerely. “I don’t think that—”

“Hold on, steward,” the elderly man said abruptly. “Many of us here are former members of the Navy. I was on the *Leviathan* myself. It’s so big that you can get lost in it. Take the boys to the captain. Let him decide...”

“All right, sir.” The steward seemed relieved that he could hand over the responsibility. “Come along, you three.”

At last! The Three Investigators followed him, and so did some passengers who had heard the exchange of words. Others looked at them only curiously.

The steward took them to the ship’s bridge, knocked briefly and opened the door. “Captain James, here are three boys with a rather incredible story for you.”

The captain, who stood next to the helmsman, turned around. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in a white uniform. Darkly he sparkled at the steward. “What’s this? Slater, you know very well that I do not want to be disturbed by any passengers!”

“Yes, Captain,” said the steward. “But perhaps you should listen to them.”

“I don’t want to listen to anyone! Get out!”

But Jupiter pushed past the steward. “You must listen to us, Captain! There are people on board the *Leviathan* and you must stop the explosion!”

The captain’s face turned red and he took a deep breath. But Jupiter continued to talk: “My name is Jupiter Jones. These are my colleagues, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. We are investigators and we work frequently with the Rocky Beach Police Department, and right now Sergeant Madhu from the Waterside Police Department is with a Navy admiral explaining the same situation to him. You need to start looking for a white yacht immediately, which should be near the *Leviathan*. There are people who are either already on board the aircraft carrier or on their way there. They do not know that the ship is to be blown up. You must either intercept them or stop the Navy from blowing up the *Leviathan*!”

The captain stared at him. “You must be out of your mind!”

“No, sir. But we don’t have much time left. Please find the white yacht and radio the Navy.”

“Radio the Navy... yes, of course, nothing easier than that. Boy, do you have any idea how a detonation like that works? It’s all done electronically according to a schedule, not some blaster with a fuse and a lighter sitting around waiting for the final command! Even if I were to reach someone—and I don’t know who—there would be no way to stop the blasting now.”

“Try it!” cried Bob. “Please!”

The captain looked at him angrily, but something in Bob’s eyes seemed to touch him after all.

“All right,” he growled. “But this better not be a silly prank!” He reached for a radio phone and quickly keyed in a number.

After a few seconds, someone answered and he said: “This is Captain Robert James, on board the *Fiesta*. Listen, I have a report here that there are people on board the *Leviathan*. Do you know anything about it?” There was a pause, in which he silently glared at The Three Investigators. “Yeah. Three boys... One policeman? Aha... And what is being done about it? ... Yes, I thought so... How? ... No, I have them here on board. They claim... Yes, of

course. I know that... Yes, sir. But I felt it is my duty to enquire... Aye, aye, sir." He put the radio phone back on. "There. The Navy knows. Are you happy now?"

"Will they stop the blasting?" Bob asked.

The captain looked at him angrily. "No, they won't. There's nobody on board, okay?"

"Sir!" cried Bob. "We know that—"

"There she is!" cried Pete loudly in between. Everyone drove around and stared out the window.

And there the *Leviathan* was, barely five hundred metres ahead of them and gigantic even at that distance. A colossus of iron and steel, 180 metres long, against which the four tug boats—each of which must be thirty metres long—looked like toy boats. They had already cut the tow ropes and were slowly moving away from the colossus over which three Navy helicopters were circling.

Within a radius of one kilometre, many smaller ships could be seen, whose crew and passengers did not want to miss the spectacle.

"So," said the captain in a voice announcing disaster, "there she is. But there is no white yacht near her. If there is, it would have been discovered and intercepted by the tug boats or helicopters long ago. But dozens of white yachts are sailing around outside the safe distance, which is their right, especially since the press and official representatives are watching the spectacle. What do you say now, you half-baked prophets of doom? Do you actually know that you have made yourselves punishable with your mischief? The Navy doesn't like to be made a fool of!"

Jupiter stared out of the window. "I very much hope that we are wrong, sir," he said. "But all the circumstantial evidence suggests that—"

"Circumstantial evidence?" the captain burst out. "What is this idiotic game you are playing? Get out of here, you rascals! And as soon as we're back in port, I'm handing you over to the police! Get out!"

Slater, the steward, rudely pushed the three outside. "You've got yourselves in a lot of trouble. Hide your faces somewhere as I don't want to see or hear from you for the rest of the trip!"

Under the eyes of the passengers, they stumbled outside. Many of the former Navy members eyed them hostilely and then turned away from them demonstratively. Only the retired officer who had paid for their third ticket waved them to him. He was sitting on a deck chair and had put his cane beside him.

"Sit down here, boys," he said. "You better get out of the way of the crew now." He shook his head. "You've played a dirty trick on the captain."

"It's not a trick, it is true!" Pete exclaimed defiantly. "Do you not believe us?"

"You do believe that, don't you?" said the man. "But I hope very much you are wrong."

"So do we," said Jupiter. "Did you say you were on the *Leviathan*?"

"I was even the captain once, but that was a long time ago. Here is my card since you gave me yours. Tell me—"

A loud boom cut him off. Everyone stared over at the *Leviathan*. A huge jet of flame rose from the rear. Then, there was a second boom and another darting flame shot up from the bow. More flashes of light followed and the crackling sounded like loud fireworks. A huge cloud of smoke billowed over the deck, flames blazed towering high and for a few moments, the water was fiery red, as if it was itself on fire.

The aircraft carrier lay completely still for a while, as if the explosions had done nothing at all. But then the stern leaned towards the water and the bow was lifted, rising ever steeper, and finally the *Leviathan* sank into the sea.

A strange sound accompanied the sinking of the mighty ship, a deep howling and creaking like the groaning of a dying giant. And as if to echo that, the siren of the *Fiesta* howled—one, two, three times, long and muffled, as a final salute, and the sirens of the other ships tuned in.

The sinking giant slowly and silently glided into the depths and the waves reached the *Fiesta*, lifted it harmlessly and slid under it.

Then the ocean was silent again, and only a few large bubbles of air that swelled and burst to the surface revealed what had just happened here.

*To be continued in
Part III: The Showdown with Rashura.*